

ARGOSY



JUNE
1

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

10¢

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*Frank L. Packard
in this issue !*

Blood
on the
Snow

*Latest
Novel
by*

Fred
MacIsaac

and

High-Line Riders

Western Outlaw Novelette

By Eugene Cunningham

*Emmett
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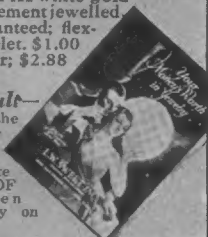
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Gillette

ARGOSY



ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 204

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This magazine is on sale every Wednesday throughout the United States and Canada

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, N. Y., and

LONDON: HACHETTE & CIE.,
16-17 King William Street, Charing Cross, W.C. 2

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE.,
111 Rue Réaumur

WILLIAM T. DEWART, President and Treasurer

C. T. DIXON, Vice-President

PUBLISHED WEEKLY AND COPYRIGHT, 1929, BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY.

Single copies, 10 cents; by the year, \$4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; \$7.00 to Canada and Foreign Countries.

Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered

Entered as second-class matter November 28, 1896, at the post-office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

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is to put the reader in touch immediately with the newest needsfuls for the home, office, farm, or person; to offer, or seek, an unusual business opportunity, or to suggest a service that may be performed satisfactorily through correspondence. It will pay a housewife or business man equally well to read these advertisements carefully.

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Classified Advertising continued from page 4.

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IVORY SOAP

... kind to everything it touches • 99⁴⁴/₁₀₀ % Pure • "It floats"

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ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 204

SATURDAY, JUNE 1, 1929

NUMBER 1



"I don't believe I ever heard of you," he countered

Blood on the Snow

Phil Deckert, hard-boiled newspaper man, and Dorrit Dolliver, heiress and society girl, moved in different circles—but when those circles overlapped, things began to happen

By FRED MACISAAC

Author of "Big Man," "The Spectral Passenger," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A RUT—AND DYNAMITE.

WHEN the old-timer who had worked in the slot of the copy desk of the New York *Evening Mercury* for twenty years, died suddenly of some heart vagary, a promising copy reader, was advanced to the position of head of the desk, and the managing editor looked

around for a new copy reader. After consultation, and following the paper's policy of never taking on an outsider if a member of the staff was available for a vacant post, he determined to make a desk man out of Phil Deckert, who covered police headquarters.

Everybody knew it before Phil, who worked nights. When he found a note in his mail box instructing him to report for duty at eight o'clock Monday

morning, he read the missive with astonishment, then strode angrily to the door of the private office of Moses Brown, the managing editor, opened it without knocking, and entered.

Mr. Brown sat before an old-fashioned roll-top desk piled high with proofs, copy paper, personal and business mail, and all sorts of things, including a pair of old shoes. He was a spare little man of fifty, with gold-rimmed spectacles, a long nose, a chin like *Punch* in the *Punch* and Judy show, a thick, brown mustache, and an elderly and threadbare suit of clothes.

"What's the meaning of this, Mr. Brown?" demanded the reporter, excitedly waving his letter, which was written upon a sheet of newspaper copy paper.

"Hello, Phil," said the managing editor with a deprecating smile. "What's the matter? You've been promoted, haven't you?"

Phil Deckert favored him with a furious glare. "Like heck I have," he snarled. "What's the idea of making a desk man out of me? I make seventy-five dollars now, and you only pay the copy readers sixty."

Mr. Brown whirled around in his swivel chair, leaned back, crossed his legs and folded his hands across his lean stomach.

"Don't get excited," he chided. "I'm not cutting your salary."

"But, goldarn it, I don't want to be a copy reader. I'm a reporter. I'm a good reporter."

The managing editor removed his glasses, wiped them and returned them to their perch on his nose. He inspected his visitor shrewdly. He saw a tall, thin man with a fine head—he happened to know Phil wore a seven and a half hat—a head whose hair had been a thick and glossy brown, but was now getting thin on top and was smeared with gray over the ears and at the temples. The face was keen, sharp, and pleasing, though it would look better if it were shaved. The

mouth was firm, the nose substantial, the chin square, the eyes a very dark blue.

"How old are you, Phil?" he asked crisply.

"What the heck difference does it make how old I am?"

Mr. Brown put his fingers together as one does at prayers. "You must be close to forty. You came to work for us at least twenty years ago."

"I'm thirty-seven," said Phil defiantly. "I began to work as a district man when I was seventeen years old. I worked my way through college by covering night police, if you remember that far back. You were city editor then."

"H-m. You're covering night police now, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Mr. Brown spread his hands wide and refolded them on his stomach. The gesture had significance for Phil Deckert, who grew red. "I've done every blamed thing on the paper," he asserted truculently.

"And now you're back where you started, Phil. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"I suppose I'm just filling in until something big breaks."

MOSES BROWN sighed heavily. "About the time you broke in we had Grover Murphy, Lee Withers, Joe Grimes, Jack MacCarthy. A great gang, Phil."

"You bet they were. I guess I was considered the star reporter. Most of those fellows used to be assigned to work under my direction on big stories."

"Yes, that's right. Let's see—Murphy is president of the Bank of Golconda now. Grimes is secretary to the president of the United States. I met Jack MacCarthy at a dinner recently. He makes about a hundred thousand a year out of his plays. Withers was killed in the Argonne. He was a bright boy, Phil. He would have

gone far if he hadn't stopped a bullet."

"Poor Lee. But what's this got to do with my going on the copy desk?"

"You're covering night police, Phil. You've had your day as a reporter, and now you're going into the Snug Harbor of old newspaper men."

Phil leaped to his feet. "I am not an old man, and I won't be thrown on the copy desk!" he shouted.

"Sit down, Phil. Now listen to me. You were a great reporter; one of the best sleuths we ever had; a fine man on a fire or a shipwreck. You got to the phone first, and you always had the facts. Somebody else wrote them. The fact is you were a leg man, Phil, and your legs are getting old."

"I can run three miles in eighteen minutes, yet," he retorted.

"The game is changing, too. We don't go after stories the way we used to. Scoops are not so important, features are the thing. You aren't much of a writer, now, are you? I remember we tried you on the rewrite desk, and your stuff was very commonplace. The last big stories you were assigned to, kids on other papers trimmed you. We can't afford to pay seventy-five a week for night police, and there doesn't seem anything else but the desk."

"So I'm a superannuated fossil at thirty-seven," Phil said bitterly.

"Newspapers are a young man's game," the managing editor said. "It's a wonderful business in which to spend five or ten years and then get into something else, unless you happen to be a brilliant writer or a born executive, and the writer goes into the magazines or writes books and plays. You're a young man yet, except in this game, my boy."

"This game has gone to the devil. If I do dig up a big story it's crowded out by features."

"Because you don't write your story so brilliantly that we *have* to run it. I bet it's months since you've done more than telephone to the rewrite desk."

Phil nodded sullenly.

"You've lost your pep and your enthusiasm. You won't slide to second any more. You get together with other old-timers and discuss the brave days of yore. So you go on the copy desk Monday."

Phil brought his hands together with a bang. "No!" he roared. "Not on your life."

"Then—er—"

"I'm fired."

Moses Brown nodded sadly.

"Shake," said Phil, suddenly smiling. His teeth were very white and very even, and his smile was winning. "Much obliged. All I needed was a swift kick."

"You may find it harder to land on other papers than you think," warned the managing editor as he clasped the hand.

Phil, curiously enough, was looking five years younger than he had appeared when he entered. In his eye was a rollicking look that Brown remembered in the days when he landed the big stories.

"Catch me trying," he replied with a laugh. "Brownie, you're a good scout, and everything you said was true. I'm a has-been in this crazy business, but in every other respect I'm a gay young lad. I can box, wrestle, run, jump, and I'm not so terrible with the girls. Watch my smoke."

"What are you going to do?"

"You can search me, but I'm going to go fast. I've got about twenty wasted years to make up. I'm going to take the world by the throat and shake out of it what I've missed."

"Got any money?" asked the editor.

"Oh, six or seven hundred. I never bothered to save much. It will do."

"I suppose you intend to open a publicity office. It won't do. You lack that kind of imagination, Phil, and you can't write."

"Never thought of it. I'm going where the money is and grab off a big bundle for myself."

"Get some for me," suggested Brown. "In another five years they'll tie a can to me and hire a young, up-to-date managing editor. Everything I said to you goes double for me."

PHIL DECKERT shook hands again, then walked straight out of the *Mercury* office without pausing to explain or say good-bye to the men in the editorial room.

After twenty years in this office, to which he had given his youth and his energy without thought of reservation, he was through; and he had no desire to hear eulogies or receive farewells. Few of the present staff were his friends, just a lot of kids; most of the old-timers had died or got out. Now he was going, about ten years too late.

In the good old days he might have dropped into a saloon and celebrated his release from slavery by getting tight with a good gang. Now he returned to the small hotel where he paid twelve a week for a furnished room up near the roof, to consider soberly and in dead earnest the revolution in his life. He did not regret his hasty decision. Some desk men would rise to be managing editors, but he was not the type; for him to sit all day reading copy and writing heads would be the beginning of the end.

He had loved the newspaper game, but for years he had been in a terrible rut, and it had required an explosion of dynamite to blow him out. At that it was a blessing that Brown had bothered to talk the matter over with him. Serene in his knowledge of his past record he had no notion that he was being considered as a liability instead of an asset, until Brown had opened his eyes. While he might take another newspaper job and demonstrate to old Brown that he didn't know a good man when he had one, in a few years he would be back where he was now, and just that much older; too old to branch out; he would be reduced to taking the desk job.

The new newspaper game might be a good one, but it was not the kind that he liked. The old thrill was gone. Now for the world, where a man ascended on the steps he had already laid, and wasn't forced to start at scratch at the dawning of every new day. What should it be?

Prematurely gray? What of it? He was single; had given no hostages to fortune; his parents were gone; he was absolutely and completely on his own, with a world of newspaper experience behind him.

He lay down on the bed to think it over. At the end of an hour he was still thinking, rather seriously now. A man of thirty-seven, whose only trade renounced him, was like a youngster fresh from college, except that the boy was willing to begin at the bottom, and Phil couldn't afford to do so.

Save for three months in a training camp during the war, he had never had a chance to travel, being tied to his New York job like an old mule to a windlass. If a chance offered to go West, or to Europe or South America, he would take it. Change of scene would freshen him up, make him the man who used to be.

He marshaled his assets before him, a little over five hundred dollars in a savings bank, some two hundred in a checking account, several charmingly engraved certificates of stock purchased on alleged inside information during the past two decades which represented three or four thousand dollars of his savings and which were quite worthless.

He possessed imponderable assets, so he believed. During his service as a newspaper man he had acquired a very wide acquaintance in New York, if comparatively few friends. He knew the mayor and Governor well enough to call them by their first names; everybody did that; but they called him by his first name, too.

The whole political galaxy: Congressmen, commissioners of every sort,

police officials, ward leaders, Tammany chiefs, had a hearty welcome for Phil Deckert. There were big bankers and brokers, captains of industry, railroad magnates, society leaders, theatrical producers, Broadway stars, film luminaries, owners of racing stables, jockeys, touts, bookies, night club proprietors, important folk in every walk of life who had the glad hand for Phil Deckert of the *Mercury*. Such an acquaintance, at a glance, seemed very valuable; but Phil, with the cynicism of long service on a New York newspaper, discounted much of it.

For Phil Deckert of the *Mercury*, open house. For Phil Deckert, minus the power of the press, the cold shoulder. It was the reporter they catered to, not the man. Bereft of his power to write them up, he was of little use to most of them.

A certain amount of courtesy he could command, because he might return to a newspaper and get even with those who had slighted him, but as soon as they were certain that he was entirely out of the business, he knew they would forget him as rapidly as possible.

HE smiled rather bitterly as he considered these things. Twenty years of reporting in New York, particularly criminal and political reporting, may be depended upon to destroy any illusions possessed by a young man starting life anew.

Phil was convinced that success in New York was achieved only by icy selfishness and ruthless elimination of all decent qualities. The geniality of the politician was false, the hearty openhandedness of the business genius was a bluff. They had use only for those who could serve their purposes in one way or another; their philanthropies were cold-blooded calculation, their milk of human kindness was white vinegar.

He had one advantage, he could get admitted to their sanctums where

others would be rebuffed by secretaries or underlings. Phil thought he could break into the offices of more big men than any other reporter in New York. He could make them listen to a proposition where others would fail to get a hearing; but unless his proposition was really worth while, he couldn't sell it.

As Phil Deckert of the *Mercury*, he could probably borrow money from a lot of them, small sums here and there, money which they would never expect to be repaid, but which they considered an investment in good will. Phil had never been a panhandler, had never taken a bribe or earned a dishonest dollar.

Although he did not realize it, his probity had much to do with the pleasantness of his relations with big men of one sort or another. There had been a good many times during his twenty years when he could have sold his silence upon certain matters for very large sums, but he was not even aware of this, for no one dared approach him with dirty money. He saw grafters waxing wealthy on all sides, but he kept his hands clean. Phil was an old-fashioned newspaper man; a "newspaper nut," he was called; owned body and soul by his journal; completely above temptation to profit by the knowledge which came to him in the way of business.

Long since he had concluded that his integrity was idiotic; that it got him nothing! that the world consisted of wolves and sheep, of grafters and grafees; but he earned enough to pay his way; he had no expensive tastes; his loyalty to his paper and to his profession remained untainted.

Now he was out. He could pick up some measly job—theatrical press agent, film actresses' errand boy, secretaryship to a Congressman, prohibition agent—he chuckled at that—city inspector of one sort or another, positions that would bring him in three or four thousand dollars a year; but he

was thirty-seven, and if he ever expected to amount to anything, now was the time to begin. No more blind alleys. "The big money," he had boasted to Moses Brown, poor old has-been like himself. Play the game the way the rest of the world went at it. Strike hard. Be merciless. Tread upon the bodies of the unfit.

Great idea if a fellow knew how to do it. But unless he touched a salary he would be broke in six weeks.

Phil went out to dinner, and then attended a theater. He saw the producer in the lobby, and, though it was a Saturday night and a sell-out, the theatrical man insisted upon giving him a free ticket; he knew Phil Deckert of old.

CHAPTER II.

CASHING IN ON A REPUTATION.

IT was the sort of play which New York has come to love lately, a crook drama; a play in which attractive but dishonest people prey on boobies, and are saved from justice in the end by an idiotic and unrealistic twist which turns them into splendid characters. The audience loved it, and Phil, sneering, thought he knew why. They were all crooks at heart, deterred from evil ways only by fear of punishment. Such plays were essentially as immoral as Hades, yet the authorities never interfered, but busied themselves putting clothes on chorus girls and eliminating racy lines from farces.

Now the plot of this play had nothing to do with the scheme which popped into the head of Phil Deckert, and the scheme itself was a hazy, formless thing, though it clarified as the evening went on.

It began by consideration of his own stupid and profitless career compared with that of fellows who had started life with him and who were now on the top. He bowed to Harvey Welzman, who was entertaining two beefy, red-

faced men and three peroxidized, overdressed women in a right-hand stage box. Welzman had been in his class in college, had violated the honor system in examinations, had sold worthless bonds to friends of his family, drifted into real estate, got a farm in Westchester away from a widow for a song, turned it into a development and made a small fortune which he had ballooned into a big one. Harvey had been a crook, and was no longer a crook only because he had so much money he didn't have to be.

Harvey saw Phil and waved a fat hand at him upon which glittered a three-carat diamond ring. Phil nodded curtly. Harvey would always be polite to him, because Phil knew so much about him.

Sunday morning, about ten o'clock, he got Moses Brown on the phone at his residence.

"Hello, Phil," the managing editor greeted him. "Decided to take the desk job?"

"No. I want to ask you a favor."

"Ask me for anything but money. I haven't any of that."

"Brownie, I want you to keep my resignation dark. Give me two weeks' notice, but don't let anybody know I am leaving."

"I'll do better than that, Phil. You would get a vacation in a few months. Take it now, and when you come back in two weeks I'll give you two weeks' notice if you haven't changed your mind in the meantime. That's a month's pay you will be getting no matter what happens."

Brown could not see Phil's satisfied smile. "Why, that's wonderful of you, boss," he declared. "The cash will certainly come in handy."

THE Golconda National Bank and Trust Company occupies a twenty-four-story building on Madison Avenue, and the offices of the bank are a double-sized reproduction of the Pantheon in Rome.

Grover Murphy, the president, had been elected when it was a small bank, but he had been the first banker to realize that the motion picture business was an industry, not a game of pinochle, and he had dared to finance it. Now, after gobbling up three or four banks which had made the mistake of being conservative, he was at the head of an institution which had assets of several hundred million, and he was supposed to be worth a few million himself. He had got out of the newspaper business after three or four years, but he still prided himself on his journalistic past, and always had a cordial greeting for the "boys."

Murphy had been a small, slim, handsome youth in his *Mercury* days, and he was still small, but he had doubled in width, and he was as handsome as any man could be with four chins.

With the charming and ostentatious democracy displayed by many great bankers, he sat in full view of anybody who entered the bank, and apparently was easy of access; but if an outlander tried to reach him, he found himself obstructed by three or four rails and five or six polite individuals who appeared from nowhere and who ingeniously shunted him upon a siding.

Phil Deckert had not seen Grover for four or five years, nor had he ever entered the new building of the Golconda, yet he went through those railings as easily as a pig through a packing plant, for Murphy saw him coming and recognized him.

"Phil, you old son-of-a-gun," he boomed, rising from his chair and throwing his right arm over the shoulder of the reporter. "You're a sight for sore eyes. Sit right down and have a cigar."

"You've got a whale of a place here, Mr. Murphy," said Phil, who was really tremendously impressed.

"Not so bad, not so bad. Did it all myself, Phil. You ought to have broken out of the newspaper game

when I did. No place for a fellow who wants to get along in the world."

"I guess you're right."

"Sure I'm right. How are things on the sheet?"

"Very few of the old gang left. Moses Brown is managing editor and I'm on the night police trick."

"You've got a lot of influence with the police, haven't you, Phil?"

"You said it," he declared. "The commissioner eats out of my hand."

"How are you at the office of the Federal District Attorney?"

"Ace-high."

Murphy nodded reflectively. "Glad you came in," he said. "You might be able to do something for me shortly if you don't mind."

"Delighted. In the meantime, you can do something for me."

The bank president's mask of geniality vanished, and Phil saw the cold, calculating face of the man who had built a five-million-dollar bank into a three-hundred-million institution. Phil grinned satirically.

"Yes?" asked Grover Murphy.

"I'm wise to a whale of a big thing. I can't tell you what it is, but you can take my word that I know what I'm about. I came in here to borrow ten thousand dollars from your bank without security. How about it?"

"Absolutely against our principles, Phil," declared Mr. Murphy. "We are subject to government regulation and a bank has no right to loan money without ample security."

"I bet you have a million dollars out on unsecured notes at this minute," said the sophisticated one.

"Of course, under certain circumstances; we feel justified sometimes in considering character as security. Now we would not hesitate to loan J. P. Morgan a large sum on an unsecured note."

"And Henry Ford could do business with you and John D. Rockefeller," scoffed Phil. "What's the matter with my character?"

"Fine, Phil, fine, but you get a small salary. If you lost this money you couldn't pay it back."

"I CAN tell you this much. I am not gambling this money. It is not even passing out of my hands. I need it to hold for three months. Will you give it to me?"

"Yes," said Murphy. "At least, I'll let you have five thousand at sixty days. If you can tell me what the game is, I'll give you ten thousand."

"I must have ten thousand at ninety days," persisted Phil Deckert.

"I would have to be personally responsible for it."

"You can afford it."

"By the way, would you mind dropping in on the District Attorney without letting him know that I sent you, and see what can be done about dropping the prosecution of Marion Middleton, the night club hostess? A friend of mine is—er—"

"I think I can promise you that it will be dropped," Phil said with an understanding smile. He happened to know that this young lady had already made her peace with the authorities.

"It's all very irregular," sighed the bank president, "but you bear a fine reputation, Phil, and I'll take a chance." He turned the applicant for a loan over to a vice president, who prepared the necessary papers.

"You will want to open an account with us, of course, and deposit the check," said the official. Phil nodded.

In fifteen minutes he left the bank with a deposit book showing that he had ten thousand dollars at his disposal, six times as much money as he ever had in his life before.

For the remainder of the day Phil visited banks and interviewed bank presidents, and the amount of his borrowings were based upon his acquaintance. In only one case was he refused; from four other banks he secured the total of thirty thousand dollars, and when he went back to his hotel that

afternoon he had forty thousand dollars to his credit in five banking institutions.

He was somewhat dazed at the ease with which he had accomplished what the ordinary person would consider utterly impossible. For the use of this money he was pledged to pay at the rate of six per cent per year and he was on paper to return the loans within sixty days in two cases and in ninety days in the case of the other three. These loans had been granted because the men he visited had known him for twenty years or so and believed him to be straight and reliable.

As Murphy had stated, they were taking chances on his character. He was confident that he could secure renewal of the loans when the notes were due by paying the interest, provided the bank presidents did not get together and discover that he had borrowed so heavily. Lest the discovery be made, he intended to draw out the entire sum within a day or two and put the money in a safety-deposit vault or in a bank where he was unknown.

That evening Phil was busy with paper and pencil working upon a list which he checked over, and beside the individual names on it he placed certain figures.

He did not sleep much; the novelty of being a capitalist made him very nervous, and he was ready to begin operations bright and early in the morning. His first call was upon Martin Fagin, a prominent contractor and a power in politics. As had been the case with the bank presidents, he was not detained in the outer office. Mr. Fagin was a ponderous, brutal-looking individual with fists that terrified, and cold blue eyes which brooked no nonsense; a horny-handed, hard-hearted, dynamic and unprincipled person who undertook to construct anything from a shanty to an under-river tunnel, and who had a manner of securing contracts that his rivals would have given much to fathom.

"What do you want of me, Phil?" he grumbled. "I'm up to my neck in work and there's nothing to interview me about. Besides, I thought you were doing police these days."

"I won't detain you long, Mr. Fagin," he smiled as he seated himself. "To be brief, I need five thousand dollars. Will you take my note?"

Fagin leaned forward, his arms on his desk, and began to drum on the glass top with his fingers.

"I've known you for ten years," he said. "I've offered to put things in your way, but you never accepted. What do you want the money for?"

"I need it. I expect to be able to pay it back. Do I get it?"

The cold blue eyes scrutinized him for a moment, and Phil reddened under his gaze. Then the big man opened a drawer, drew out a check book and wrote a check for five thousand dollars. He tore a blank note from a book and passed it to Phil, who scribbled upon it and handed it back.

"I never do anything for nothing, Phil," said Fagin coldly. "When I need you, I want no nonsense from you and I may need you soon. I see you've made it out for ninety days at six per cent. That's all right."

HIS collections that day were very fruitful. A bucket-shop proprietor gave him two thousand five hundred dollars, an ex-police commissioner contributed three thousand, a broker who was conducting a selling campaign of oil stock through the newspapers supplied five thousand, an automobile manufacturer put up two thousand five hundred dollars, a prize fight promoter contributed three thousand five hundred dollars, a United States Senatorship aspirant loaned him one thousand, and half a dozen business men totaled ten thousand dollars more. All these checks he had certified, and the following morning he crossed to New Jersey, opening an account in a Newark bank. That day he

drew checks on the banks in New York which had taken his note, for all save a few hundred dollars of his balance, and he tapped other golden fountains for twenty-five thousand more.

The largest sum of money which Phil had ever accumulated at one time up to this moment was fifteen hundred dollars. In three days the seventy-five-dollar-a-week reporter had succeeded in borrowing one hundred thousand dollars upon his face and his past reputation for integrity. To him the thing was hardly believable, and save for one feature of his achievement he might have faltered in his purpose; it was that every person who had loaned him money had either declared outright, like Murphy and Fagin, or had intimated more politely, that he expected something from Phil which he had no business to barter; his newspaper influence for one purpose or another.

They had each loaned him comparatively small sums which they were confident that he could repay, charged him six per cent interest, so they stood to make a profit upon the transaction, yet they expected from him a return for their courtesy. Indian givers, all of them.

Furthermore, when they should learn that Phil Deckert was no longer on the *Mercury* and had succeeded in borrowing a very large sum of money, they would all take fright and endeavor to force him to return the cash immediately. Legally they did not have a leg to stand on, for they had made the loans freely and had no right to expect repayment until the notes were due. Even then, if he failed to pay, they could only sue him individually, get judgment, and collect his assets when found. Apparently he was safe for from two to three months.

Phil, however, had tapped the tills of some of the most influential persons in New York and he was very well aware that such men could go outside the law to get him. If they found out where he had deposited his hoard, they

could attach it by putting up a bond equal to the amount attached and by hook or crook keep it out of his hands until the notes were due, when they could legally take it back.

While he had a perfect right to borrow money from as many people as might be willing to lend it to him, clever lawyers could make it appear that the industry with which he had planted notes during the past three days indicated intent to defraud, and at the very least he would be required to explain for what purpose he had accumulated such an amount of other people's funds.

This would be very difficult; for at the moment Phil Deckert did not know what he was going to do with the hundred thousand dollars. To do well in the world a man requires capital, and if he hasn't money he borrows it if he can. The reporter was aware that he couldn't have secured a dollar of this amazing fund if the gentlemen who loaned it had known that he had left the *Mercury*, was out of a job, and had no prospects whatever; he had pledged Moses Brown to secrecy regarding his resignation from the newspaper for that reason.

Now that he had money in scads, what was he going to do with it? Money makes money, so says the adage, but it doesn't unless the holder of it understands manufacturing.

With a hundred thousand dollars he could buy stocks on margin and greatly increase his money if they went up a few points or more in the next sixty days; but if they dropped he would be penniless when his notes came due. Phil had no notion of dabbling in stocks; he had seen too many optimists dragged to police headquarters for gambling with other people's money.

He knew a certain criminal lawyer in town who for fifty per cent of his loot would arrange things so he could keep the balance and stay out of jail. This lawyer would know how to prove that the young man had borrowed in

good faith, made unfortunate investments, and was sorry he couldn't meet his notes, but was willing to take the poor debtor's oath.

PHIL didn't care to give half his hundred thousand to a crooked lawyer, and he had no desire to beat these confiding business men out of the money they were so kind as to loan him without security. It seemed to him that he ought to be able to use the cash in such a way as to pay him a large profit and enable him to return the principal when the notes were due.

He was not avaricious, he would be happy with a paltry fifty per cent profit and even twenty-five per cent would not be so bad. There must be something a fellow could do with a huge wad of cash. It was his big chance and he must not miss it.

If the creditors did not get terrified and jump him, he was confident he could put the thing over, but, as the prospects were that they would take alarm, he must arrange things so that they could not obstruct him.

Before going to bed that night he prepared the following circular letter which he would send out as soon as all checks had gone through the clearing house and he was able to withdraw from the Newark bank his entire borrowed capital. The letter was as follows:

DEAR SIR:

As I explained to you when you accepted my note, I have a big enterprise under way which requires my absence from the city for a short time. On my return I'll drop in and tell you what I have been working on. In the meantime, accept my gratitude for your confidence in me, your courtesy and consideration.

Yours very truly,
PHILIP DECKERT.

Now, if they heard he had left the *Mercury*, they would assume it was in connection with the business enterprise referred to, and the fact that he had

notified them that he would be out of town would ease their minds if they missed him. If he were in another State it would be very difficult for any of them to lay hands on him for the return of money which was legally his until a certain date.

Night brought him no counsel as to the investment of his temporary capital and he looked over the morning paper with special attention to the advertisements in the hope of suggestions.

There were a multitude of suggestions. Real estate men insisted that money could be doubled overnight in Long Island lots. Apartment houses were going for a song, tips on the stock market which would make a man's fortune would be given for a small sum by "One Who Knows." There were new issues of industrial and railroad stocks paying five, six and seven per cent, bonds of a Balkan country which would yield eleven if the country didn't blow up before they were due, bargains of every conceivable description were attractively advertised, but nothing that helped Phil Deckert in his peculiar problem.

While he was reading, his telephone rang, and he answered it mechanically.

"This is Mr. Murphy's secretary at the Golconda Bank," said a pleasant female voice. "Mr. Murphy would like to have you drop in to-day if it is convenient."

He hesitated. Had Murphy grown suspicious already? "Tell him, please, that I am just going to the railroad station," he replied. "I won't be back from the country before closing time at the bank, but I'll come in to see him to-morrow."

He waited breathless as she repeated his message. "Mr. Murphy says to-morrow will do, or the next day. No hurry."

Phil breathed again. Murphy was not suspicious. Most likely he wanted information regarding the cabaret hos-

tess case which Phil had promised to square.

CHAPTER III.

THE SOCIAL SWIM.

THERE is an impression prevalent in the land that the daughters of multimillionaires are invariably unbeautiful, an impression doubtless created by the photographs which appear in the society sections of the Sunday newspapers.

It is true that many of our richest girls would not disorganize traffic if they took a stroll along the avenue, and some of them squint, have pimples and snub noses; but blue blood does not always produce ugly women, and any hundred society débutantes chosen at random and compared with the same number of salesgirls in a ten-cent store would probably include as many pretty damsels as the working women and perhaps a beauty or two who would shade the best the shopgirls could produce.

Take Dorrit Dolliver, for example. Her great-grandfather came over from Scotland about the time Queen Victoria married Prince Albert, and opened a pawnshop in lower New York. There used to be Scotch pawnbrokers in New York, but the Israelites put them out of business. In London to this very day, the very best and most exclusive pawnbrokers are Scotchmen, and the aristocracy would not think of patronizing any others.

Old Dolliver had vision, and his little pawnshop grew in a few years into a bank patronized by emigrants from the British Isles, and Peter Dolliver, about the time of the Civil War, had money enough to invest in a blockade runner which sailed from Wilmington, North Carolina, and carried cotton to the mills of Manchester until a Yankee warship sank her. By that time she had made a profit for her owner of about a million dollars and nobody ever

suspected the New York banker of trafficking with the Confederacy. Then he met a speculator named Jim Fisk and financed some of the daring coups of that bold speculator during the seventies. The profits from raids on railroads and industrials enabled Mr. Dolliver to set up as a country gentleman in that part of New York which is now upper Riverside Drive.

Dorrit's grandfather sent over to Scotland and hired a genealogical expert to prove that the Dollivers were descended from Robert Bruce on one side and Charles Stuart on the other. He contributed liberally to the queer Jacobite society, which still exists in England and which is composed of serious-minded and unpugnacious Scottish and English squires, who meet every now and then, pull down the curtains, and drink a toast to the rightful queen, a Bavarian princess, at present having a hard time of it in Switzerland. In this way he drew titled visitors to his home in New York.

So it was natural, when Ward McAlister was drawing up his list of four hundred aristocratic families in New York City, that he should include the Dollivers as among the *crème de la crème*; and the Dollivers of 1927, who, being Scotch, had held on to their millions, were among the acknowledged old families and didn't have to doff their hats to anybody.

Despite this brilliant lineage Dorrit Dolliver was a very beautiful girl, so beautiful that the Prince of Wales danced with her every time he had the chance on both his visits to New York. She was not only beautiful, but she was very intelligent, for which reason she was twenty-five years old and unmarried.

If she had not been so keen mentally she would have been married off during her *débutante* year, as all the eligible young men made a rush for her, and you couldn't blame them. The Dolliver fortune was estimated at twenty millions, and Dorrit was so

lovely that she would have had some proposals, one anyway, if she hadn't been worth a penny.

A portrait of her was exhibited in New York recently among the paintings of a celebrated Russian. It hung between a portrait of a British duchess and the queen of a Balkan kingdom, neither of whom got any attention from the visitors; it was very unfair to subject them to such a test.

Dorrit's grandfather had married a French woman, and her father had married a celebrated California beauty, so there was very little porridge in the young lady. Her hair was like yellow corn, cut short like a boy's, and it revealed a beautifully proportioned little head. Her forehead was rather high and her eyes an exquisite shade of blue, just like the sky when it is cloudless and the sun is shining. The nose was anything but Scotch; it was thin, delicate, rather long than short. Her upper lip was short, making her appear to be considering the matter of smiling even when she was serious; and the chin was dainty, indeed, a chin a young man would love to see opposite him every morning of his life at the breakfast table. The neck was long and slender, the shoulders sloping and slender in a deliciously feminine manner. Hers was a thoroughly feminine figure, willowy. And the legs. Well, they were worthy of attention by persons who know what truly feminine legs ought to be. The painter was able to permit study of them because she wore a gown that stopped at the knees.

DORRIT had been "out," as they say in society, for seven years, but for the past two or three of them she had been in. That is to say, she had given up putting in an appearance at every dance and reception that happened to be scheduled. Being sure of her social position she didn't have to be on hand when the photographs were taken for the society sections of

the Sunday newspapers. The débütantes gave her a pain, and she didn't hesitate to say so, while she thought the men were simply regrettable.

Mrs. Dolliver, who had been a California belle and was still good-looking, though anybody could tell her golden hair owed much to a bottle, had given Dorrit up, had washed her hands completely of her daughter.

"That girl could have married anybody in New York or London or Paris," she asserted to a sympathetic friend. "She could have been an English duchess or a French or Italian princess; she had only to lift her little finger to get what she wanted. But the trouble with her is that she doesn't know what she wants. She's an idiot."

"Everybody says Dorrit has more brains than any girl in our set."

"What use are brains to a woman in society?" asked Mrs. Dolliver fiercely. "It isn't her brains, though, that have caused all the trouble, it's her sense of humor. She has a way of smiling at a man that makes him feel smaller than a flea. They come up to her buoyant and confident, and they go out limp; she flattens them, the poor things."

"If she were my daughter," said Mrs. Purrington, who had married off three, "I'd tell her what was what."

Mrs. Dolliver sighed. "Never think I haven't tried! But she has a way of disposing of me, too. At a certain look of hers I feel utterly foolish. After all, she is nearing twenty-six and she is sure to be an old maid. In our set, girls must marry young or not at all."

The entrance of Dorrit broke up the conference. "Hello, mother," she said cheerfully. "Good morning, Mrs. Purrington. I suppose you have been telling mother how you turned the trick with your three lovely daughters, and mother has been telling you that I am doomed to spinsterhood."

Mrs. Purrington, a plump, enameled, blondined dowager of fifty, looked somewhat dashed, but recovered.

"I'm sure, Dorrit, you would do

well to listen to your mother. Don't you want to have children, darling?"

Dorrit, who had been moving restlessly about the room, stopped and turned on the lady the Medusalike grin which so flabbergasted her own mother.

"I'm crazy to have children, but I couldn't be annoyed with a husband. Our methods of propagation are all wrong, Mrs. Purrington. We do better with our horses and dogs."

"I'm going," faltered the visitor. "My dear, you have my sympathy. That girl is horrible."

Mrs. Dolliver was weeping noisily. "Now see what you've done," she moaned. "You've shocked Mrs. Purrington. She'll talk about you and it serves you right. Dorrit, how can you treat me so?"

"Serves you right for discussing me with stupid women," said the girl indifferently. "I hope she repeats what I said to every bachelor in New York."

"Do you *want* to be an old maid?" wailed her mother.

"I'm thinking of marrying some unknown man, getting me a wedding ring, shipping the husband off to Kamchatka and in due time taking an infant from an orphan asylum and adopting it secretly. Then, perhaps, you people would consider me properly settled in life and let me alone."

"You just aren't human," Mrs. Dolliver asserted as she wiped her eyes.

Dorrit stopped in front of her. "Mother," she exclaimed, "we have all the money in the world. Our social position is second to none. What have I to gain by marriage, if you please?"

"Why, a husband to love you—children—a home of your own."

"Bah!" retorted Dorrit. "I've never seen a man I'd let into my boudoir; I can afford to keep up my own home, and, as I have often remarked, the orphan asylums are full of beautiful children, any of whom I can get without taking on a husband and father for them. Furthermore, if you don't stop

pestering me, I'll pull up stakes and leave you all flat."

"You are an unnatural child," sighed her mother. "But I'll say no more."

DORRIT took a Hungarian novel from a library shelf, curled up in a window nook, and opened her book. It was not a translation. Dorrit Dolliver could read Hungarian in the original, and also Russian and modern Greek. During the past two or three seasons she had found it more amusing to study languages and philosophy at home than to waste evenings at dinners and dances, and when a young man ventured to intrude upon her seclusion she deliberately made him so uncomfortable that he retreated early, determined to shun her like the plague in future.

As for the girls who had come out with her seven years before, all of them were married, and some had two or three children by this time. Their interests were so different from hers that she couldn't be bothered with them. The girls of her year were now divided into two classes—those who were doting mothers and chattered only of babies, and those who had refused children and were philandering widely or had concentrated upon a lover. Both classes disgusted Dorrit.

The only daughters of multimillionaires, no matter how much they might like to, cannot cut loose like the sons of multimillionaires. They are born into a circle of people who can be depended upon to take up all their available time. During Dorrit's first three or four years in society her engagement book was so full of things that had to be done that she had no chance to be by herself even if she had wished to.

There were some five or six hundred men between the ages of eighteen and forty who were entitled by birth to be introduced to Dorrit Dolliver, dance with her, motor with her, and

play golf and tennis with her; and some of these were always around. When she escaped them, scores of girls of her year, and hundreds who had been out a year or two longer, insisted upon her spare time. So far as Dorrit knew, during the first few years of it, all the worth-while men in the world were in this crowd and all the nice girls; of course, there were a hundred and twenty million other people in America, but they didn't matter.

The viewpoint of her class was much like that of the French aristocracy in the days of Louis XV; all persons not of the court were bourgeoisie or peasantry who lacked intelligence, cleanliness, and were in all ways utterly impossible. One fine day those peasants joined the bourgeoisie, sharpened meat axes, and massacred the king and all his nobles who had not already fled. Nothing like that will happen in America, because those outside the little coterie of self-appointed aristocrats consider themselves as good as those in it, and are, besides, too busy making money to bother about revolutions or aristocrats' opinions.

Almost from the beginning Dorrit was bored by what her friends considered pleasure, but she remained on the treadmill because she couldn't find an exit for three or four years. Then she took the only road of escape possible; she went in for charity. Our aristocrats must not mix with the middle classes, but they can go into the slums and do good.

Dorrit mixed with the unwashed for a season, taught surly aliens to fox trot, intruded into filthy homes with other Lady Bountifuls, and presented baskets of goodies along with excellent advice to harried housewives, who stuck out their tongues at the visitors as soon as their backs were turned.

This sort of thing quickly impressed her as ridiculous, and she withdrew as soon as she decently could. Now time hung heavily on her hands, despite her studies. She had made herself so dis-

agreeable to her old associates that they avoided her when possible, and she had found no new and pleasant acquaintances.

Dorrit could conceive of a male who would be good company, she could fancy herself marrying such a man and being tolerably happy; but she didn't believe that the man of her imagination existed. After all, she had tried in the balance and found wanting a whole regiment of the picked men of America, the rich, the aristocratic, the socially eligible. Certainly they could have no superiors among the middle classes.

If there was no desirable man in the world, she believed it much better to remain a bachelor girl and improve her mind. She was considering writing a book about something, only she could not think of anything to write about, and she found writing an ordinary letter a dreadful bore.

DORRIT knew that she was considered a swell-headed highbrow by her acquaintances, a trial by her mother, and a nonentity by her father. She could have been all these things and yet popular, if she had gone in for athletics and become a champion, but she was not the athletic type, she had no muscle and no wind to speak of, and anybody could out-swim, out-tennis, out-golf, and out-ride her. She was built for "necking," somebody had said, and as she wouldn't "neck," why bother about her? The boys had given up striving after the twenty million dollars that she was going to possess some day. Dorrit was a washout, and they felt that was putting it mildly.

The Hungarian novel was dull when it was not repulsive, and she welcomed the butler who entered with a letter. Nowadays Dorrit got few letters. She tore it open, glanced at the signature, and smiled delightedly, for it was from Claire MacIntyre, a girl who had attended finishing school with her, made

her début the same year, and at the end of her first year eloped with her father's chauffeur. The pair had gone out West somewhere, and had never been heard of since. Naturally her parents cut her off, her name was never mentioned, and the presumption was that she and her lover had perished miserably in the horrible hinterland.

DORRIT, DARLING:

You are astonished to hear from me after all these years, but I read a blurb about you in a New York Sunday newspaper. It said you had withdrawn from society and lived the life of a recluse because of some unfortunate love affair; that nobody ever saw you any more, and wasn't it a shame, since you were the most beautiful woman in society. Now, I know it must be almost as tedious to be a recluse as to be active in society, and I wondered how you would like to come West and visit my little home in Wyoming?

Everybody expected that my marriage to Joe would turn out badly, but we have fooled them all; we are perfectly happy; we have two beautiful children, a girl and a boy, and we have a prosperous little ranch in the most wonderful country in the world. You are the only girl of the old crowd that I ever think about, and I could not be hired to go back to that life. I'd love to have you; I can promise you the sort of life with which you're totally unfamiliar, and I know you'll love it. We have lots of fun in the winter, though it gets very cold. If you come, bring all your furs, darling.

Of course you folks supposed Joe was just a chauffeur, but he was very unusual, Dorrit. He had been a cowboy and drifted to New York to see the place, spied me at a theater, found out who I was, and got a job as chauffeur just to be near me. We have bought a ranch close to a national range; we have a thousand head of stock, and our life is anything but the lonely one you would imagine. Do come, dearest. I am inclosing a snapshot of Joe, myself and the kids. Isn't Joe good-looking, and aren't the babies lovely?

CLAIRE MACINTYRE,

Dorrit studied the snapshot, and the hard, bitter lines faded from her beautiful countenance. The children were adorable, and Claire, though plump

and looking her age, wore an expression that was unmistakable. She was happy; and Dorrit didn't know what happiness might be. Joe was a good-looking man of thirty years or so. She liked his eyes and the way he regarded Claire in the picture.

A curious thrill passed over her. For a second she envied Claire, whose conduct she had condemned like all the rest. After all, why should she not go to Wyoming and see for herself if Claire had found the satisfaction that New York had never given to Dorrit? It would annoy her mother to learn that she proposed to pay a visit to the girl who had married a chauffeur, and Dorrit rather liked to plague her mother. She had considered vaguely spending the winter on the French Riviera, but the weather there was usually unpleasant, and she didn't care much for the people who had invited her.

Impulsively she strode to a writing desk, seized pen and paper, and scribbled a warm letter of acceptance, after which she sealed and stamped it, and summoned the butler, with instructions to put it in the mail box. The die was cast.

CHAPTER IV.

FELLOW TRAVELERS.

DORRIT did not pay much attention to men she saw on trains and steamers, and she did not notice anybody who looked in the least interesting as she changed trains in Chicago and boarded the crack train of the Union Pacific Railroad. An obsequious porter ushered her into her drawing-room. She had purchased half a dozen new books and several magazines, but she was already bored, and she half regretted her rash decision to cross the continent to visit a girl who must have changed so completely in seven years that they could have nothing in common.

She did not see the man in the next

drawing-room, although the door was open as she passed, but the occupant of that room had seen her, and emitted a low whistle of astonishment at the passing of the blond vision.

He rose and looked out into the corridor, and saw her whisk into the next drawing-room. Phil Deckert had anticipated a solitary and very anxious journey to Los Angeles; he had every reason to be anxious and to be solitary, but the burden on his shoulders was not so great as to prevent him from acknowledging the gifts of the gods. The girl who had passed was perfectly lovely and astonishingly disturbing. He was her neighbor. If they didn't become acquainted during the long journey over prairies and deserts and mountains, it would not be his fault. Some picture star, no doubt, though she seemed to have more class than any film star of his acquaintance, and he knew a goodly number.

The girl had closed her door, so he retreated into his stateroom and resumed his seat. Upon the opposite seat rested a small cowhide suitcase which he regarded tenderly. That suitcase contained one hundred thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills.

Phil had managed his affair in New York with complete success. All his checks had passed through the clearing house, the cash was assembled in the bank in Newark, and he had withdrawn it in denominations of hundreds without being asked for an explanation of his purpose in carrying away so much legal tender.

He had chosen Los Angeles as the scene of his activities for two reasons; the first because it was as far from New York as he could get without leaving the United States, and the second because he understood that things happened quickly out there. As yet he had no plan of campaign, but only a week had elapsed since he had started out to acquire capital, and he had nearly two months before his sixty-day notes were due. To have in his pos-

session a vast sum of money terrified him, but he knew of no other way of transferring it to Los Angeles without leaving a broad trail. It must never be out of his sight, that suitcase. He would take his meals in his stateroom, lock himself in at night, and stand guard during the daytime. Until it was deposited to his credit in a Los Angeles bank he could not draw a care-free breath.

The train left Chicago at 8.30 P.M., and Phil turned into his berth at ten, but he was unable to sleep. He thought about the girl who lay within a few feet of him behind a thin steel partition; how extraordinary must be her beauty when a glimpse of her could disturb him so strangely; and he thought about the suitcase and its precious contents.

When Phil was twenty-four years old he had been very much in love with a girl whom he met on a vacation at Atlantic City. She was a stenographer in the office of a New York broker; a very pretty and vivacious young woman with black hair and eyes. He had rushed her off her feet, and she consented to be engaged to him. He had taken all his money from the bank, a matter of four hundred dollars, and purchased for her a diamond ring in a platinum setting.

The engagement lasted three months, at the end of which time she had returned him his ring and informed him that they had made a mistake; she did not love him enough to put up with the life of a newspaper reporter's wife, and she had accepted her employer, who could support her in a degree of luxury beyond any Phil could ever hope to provide.

He remembered how he had stormed and raved and finally flounced out of the apartment house in which she lived; it was on Riverside Drive in the Eighties. He had clambered down the embankment and crossed the railroad tracks to the river's edge, and contemplated jumping in to end it all, but

had finally decided to live, and threw the diamond ring into the flood instead, a grandiloquent gesture which lacked an audience.

To save his life he couldn't recall, at this moment, how that girl looked, but he had never got over his regret for tossing four hundred dollars into the Hudson. He grinned now because he had a hundred thousand dollars in the suitcase.

IF he used that money wisely he might clear enough to enable him to marry a girl like the one in the next drawing-room, live a normal, comfortable life, own a house and a garden, and raise a family. He realized that he was not a young man, but he knew that many modern young girls are more attracted by men in their late thirties than by youths their own age. That girl might learn to love him if he were given an opportunity to make her acquaintance. He was passably good-looking, the gray at his temples was picturesque, and if she should prove intelligent he thought he had enough in his head to interest her.

If he lost the money—well, "taps."

Phil had come to realize that there was no safe and sane way of augmenting his capital materially in the short time before the day of reckoning. Money, safely invested, cannot earn more than half a per cent per month, at least in New York and the East. The interest charges on his borrowings would amount, when his notes were due, to twelve or thirteen hundred dollars, and if he did not use the money at all he could not meet the interest.

He had no business training, of course. During his newspaper service he had accumulated all sorts of information; he was familiar with every form of business swindling, but he knew no legitimate way to place cash for quick and sure profits. If Grover Murphy were in his position, undoubtedly he could manipulate the hundred thousand so as to net a huge return

before settling day—that was the way Murphy had made his money; but Phil was a financial layman.

Before the train reached Los Angeles he had to make up his mind whether or not he would take a big chance, turn crook and gamble with other people's money, risk losing it all and becoming a fugitive. The woods are full of people who have failed to meet their notes, but there were points about his case which differed from that of an ordinary borrower, and he had no doubt that Grover Murphy, Martin Fagin *et al.* would find a way to put him behind the bars.

The train rumbled along, the hours passed; he dozed fitfully, to awaken with a start, feeling the touch of the law, which he had not yet broken, on his shoulder.

He saw the sun come up over the prairies; after awhile he heard people moving along the corridor outside his door. He looked at his watch; it was eight o'clock. Breakfast was ready in the dining car. Soon they would be in Omaha.

He rose, made his ablutions in the private washroom of the *de luxe* traveler. Sole ownership of a drawing-room was an extravagance, of course, but only in that way could he safeguard his suitcase. To have taken a section would have forced him to leave his treasure box in full view and easy of access all day and all night. A little haggard, even after shaving, he was finally ready for breakfast, and then the train pulled into Omaha. From his window he had a view of the blank wall of a warehouse, so he opened his door and, leaning his elbows on the rail, looked through the corridor window upon the station platform.

He heard a click, the door of the next stateroom opened, and the girl came out and took up a similar position. He stole a look at a most entrancing profile, then she turned her head in his direction, and he gazed into astonishing blue eyes. She smiled.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "Do you know what this place may be?"

Now, this was a wonderful break, for he would hardly have dared to address her.

"It's Omaha," he stated. "Not a very picturesque view here, is it?"

"No." She was looking again out of the window.

Phil drew a little closer.

"I hope you passed a good night," he ventured.

She turned her head again and appraised him coldly.

"Yes, thank you."

"It's rather a bore, being shut up in a compartment. Are you going all the way to Los Angeles?"

Dorrit Dolliver's eyes narrowed, and he flushed under her sharp scrutiny.

"Yes, and no," she replied rather sharply. "Are you under the impression you are picking me up?"

Phil had picked up a few girls in his time, and this was usually the way he went about it; nevertheless he was as furiously angry as though he had not been hoping to make an unconventional acquaintance.

"If I am not mistaken, you addressed me without an introduction, and I naturally assumed you were not averse to exchanging a few remarks with a fellow traveler," he said with as much dignity as he could collect at short notice. "I'm sorry if I offended you. I am not trying to thrust myself on you, and I now wish you good morning."

HE turned to enter his drawing-room, but Dorrit had something to say.

"Very effective and impressive, I am sure," she stated. "I did not mean to ruffle you as I appear to have done, Mr. Fellow Traveler. My question was pure curiosity. I just wondered whether I looked like the kind of a girl a stranger supposed he might meet in that way."

Phil turned and inspected her, and saw that she did not appear affronted; her expression was quite bland. He grinned engagingly.

"You are the kind of a girl a fellow would like very much to meet," he retorted. "But I wouldn't have dared address you if you hadn't broken the ice. There is something about you that says 'Hands off.'"

Dorrit now permitted her smile to dazzle him.

"I like that," she said pleasantly. "Having settled the matter satisfactorily, let us forget it. I didn't sleep last night, and I am bored. Are you a New Yorker or a Chicagooan?"

"New York," he declared, returning to his former post at the window.

"So am I. What is your name?"

"Phil Deckert."

"I don't believe I ever heard of you."

"Why should you? We have seven million people in New York."

"Oh, but only a few thousand who matter."

"Better not let the others hear you say that. They might resent it."

She shrugged indifferently. "I have never been West before," she stated. "If this is a sample, I don't imagine I'll like it."

"Railroad yards of all cities are horrible. What is your name, may I ask?"

"Does it matter?" she said, peering out the window.

Phil looked resentful. It seemed to him that this young woman was rather patronizing and condescending.

"You have the advantage of me," he reminded her.

"Oh, really? In what way?"

"You know my name, and I don't know yours."

"I am Miss Dolliver."

"I don't believe I ever heard of you," he said spitefully.

Dorrit withdrew her head from the window opening and looked him over unpleasantly.

"You wouldn't be apt to." This sounded modest, but the manner of speech was haughty.

If he had been a very young man he would have been so thrilled to converse with this girl on any terms that he would have resented nothing, but he was considerably more seasoned and poised, and he did not enjoy being treated contemptuously.

"Well, I wish you a pleasant journey," he retorted, stepped inside his room, and shut the door. One second afterward he felt like kicking himself, for he had ended their acquaintance almost as soon as it began by that snappy remark. She might be an arrogant young person, but she was delectable to gaze upon, and he might have basked in her effulgence during the whole journey if he had been able to control his tongue. Too late now. She would never speak to him again.

Dorrit looked at the door which had been shut in her face with astonishment, then frowned angrily. The man was a boor. He had been insolent enough to say he had never heard her name, and had broken off a conversation with *her*, Dorrit Dolliver, when she had replied that he would not be apt to.

Who on earth was the fellow, and why did he take such an attitude with her? She did not know any family of Deckerts, and she had a perfect right to say so, but to have him deny that he was familiar with the name of Dolliver, coming from New York as he claimed—that was nonsense. Everybody knew of the Dollivers; they were one of the first families of the metropolis. She went into her stateroom and closed her door.

He had rather a nice face, she thought—not handsome, but clean-cut and alert. He was a nice age, too, about thirty-five. Most of the men of that age whom she knew were inclined to corpulence and red faces; this person was lean as a race horse. He looked as if he might be amusing if one knew

him well, but he had a dreadful temper. Perhaps this might not be so dreary a journey as she had anticipated.

CHAPTER V.

SUDDEN DISASTER.

IN half an hour she decided she needed breakfast. She had expected to take her meals in her drawing-room, but it was stuffy, and the dining car might be interesting. Sir Hotspur would probably be there, and would by this time be sorry for his sins. She smiled with more interest in her eyes than had entered them for a long time. Men, as she knew them, were stupid, but a train encounter with a new type was a bit intriguing.

When she entered the dining car there was but one vacant table, to which the steward led her with the ostentation reserved for beautiful young ladies presumably of the motion-picture profession. As she seated herself she saw that the Deckert person was not present. Could he be so exclusive as to breakfast in privacy? Was it possible that the Deckerts were important people whom she ought to know?

Family meant much to Dorrit. Her revolt against the humdrum of fashionable existence did not extend to contempt for the pretensions of the people of her set. She had always taken it for granted that her relatives and friends were of finer clay than the common herd. All her reading tended to build up admiration for aristocracy and contempt for democracy. She was a discontented snob, but she was a snob still, and she still shuddered at times at her audacity in planning to visit the household of a person who had been a chauffeur.

Presently the steward, with a bow of apology, seated opposite her at the small table a most extraordinary person. He was a large man with a big nose, bushy eyebrows, piercing black

eyes, a skin tanned to the color of mahogany, a wide mouth with very white teeth and a jutting chin. He was arrayed in a loose jacket of brown homespun, a waistcoat of yellow and white checks across which was festooned a heavy gold watch chain. He hung up an enormous white felt hat, of the type known in the West as a two-gallon lid, and he greeted her with a broad and not repulsive smile.

He leaned his elbows on the table, and she saw that his brown hands were huge and covered with hair. On one of his spatulate fingers was a broad gold ring containing a diamond as big as a Malaga grape.

"This is my lucky day," he said in what might be described as a hearty voice.

Dorrit glanced around to see whom he was addressing, but his black eyes were on her.

"Indeed?" she said icily.

"Yep. Saw you get on the train at Chicago. I said to myself, Pete, there is a chicken with class to her. Think of being locked up on a rattler with a doll like that. And then I come into the dining car and out of all the people that might be sitting opposite me, I find you. That's why I say it's my lucky day."

He talked so loudly that she saw persons at near-by tables smiling covertly, and she reddened with indignation.

"Who are you with?" he demanded.

"I beg your pardon?"

He should have been frozen into five dollars' worth of ice, but he didn't seem to congeal at all.

"What company? I thought I knew all the gals, but you're a new one on me."

Dorrit turned upon him the glance which sent people of her acquaintance scurrying away, her best Medusa look. "I am not a motion-picture actress," she said shortly.

Neither the glance nor the acidity of her tone affected him.

"You won't be long in Hollywood before you're signed up," he asserted. "Where are you from?"

"That," said Dorrit, "is my affair."

The man who called himself Pete lifted one of his eyebrows in a whimsical manner.

"I do believe I'm getting ritzed," he observed to the dining room. Dorrit heard polite chuckles behind her. She said nothing, but attacked the eggs just set before her.

The big man thrust his hand into the breast pocket of his coat and produced a gold cardcase.

"Never had to introduce myself before," he said, with a good-natured grimace. "Usually they spot me a mile off; but here's my card, sister."

He pushed a small oblong of card-board across the table, and Dorrit, despite her pose, could not help glancing at it.

"Pete Remington, Remington Films, Hollywood, California," she read.

"Now you know my name, what's yours?" he demanded.

DORRIT signaled to the waiter.

"My check, please," she said in a low tone.

It dawned on the sociable Mr. Remington that he was actually being snubbed, and the expression on his face was wonderful to see. Dorrit laid a dollar bill on the table, rose and moved gracefully out of the car. She had eaten very little, but she had had quite enough of that society.

Mr. Remington was mumbling angrily to himself. The steward leaned over him.

"You shouldn't talk to a young lady, Pete, when she shows she doesn't want to talk to you."

Pete looked penitent as a small boy. "Aw, say," he protested, "I didn't mean no harm. First time I ever met a girl that didn't spot me right away. At that, she would have been all right if I came in on my hoss."

Dorrit had recognized the name on the card; she remembered him now as a cowboy film star, but she had no desire to make his acquaintance because of his celebrity. His manners were horrible, his personality obnoxious, and his impudence atrocious. She was sure Mr. Deckert would have put him in his place had he been present.

Unaware that his rude retreat had not demolished but rather set him up in the eyes of the exquisite but aloof Miss Dolliver, Phil ate a solitary breakfast in his drawing-room and considered how beautiful she was. The name of Dolliver did not suggest anything to him, because his journalistic career had been spent among the political, theatrical and criminal elements of New York's population, and he had never read a society page in his life.

If the Dollivers had been mixed up in a high-life scandal, he would have known about them, of course, but Dorrit's father had never figured in the public eye, and none of her relatives had ever got arrested or sued one another for divorce; therefore Phil did not know that he had been insolent to the heiress of twenty million dollars, and that she admired him for it because nobody had ever treated her like that before. She was accustomed to give, not to receive, dismissals.

He had a table set up, and covered white paper with figures for several hours, but the face and figure of the girl next door kept interfering with his totals, and finally the train slowed up and came to a full stop in Fremont.

Passengers got out and walked up and down the platform. Phil would have enjoyed getting some fresh air, but he was chained to the stateroom, so he did the next best thing—opened the window and thrust his head out. He was looking toward the rear of the train, therefore he did not see three young men sauntering down from the front end, and one could guess his alarm when something gripped the

back of his neck. It was a cane with which one of the trio had deftly hooked him, and his start of guilty terror caused all three to whoop with delight.

"Phil Deckert, you old son of a sea cook," exclaimed the man with the cane, "when did you get on the train?"

"Hello, Deckert, old collar-button, what are you doing so far from home?"

"Red Hot Diggety Dog, Phil's stuck the *Mercury* for a drawing-room, no less!" exclaimed the third man.

Phil gazed upon the trio with disfavor. There was Miller of the *Sphere*, Lufkin of the *Planet*, and Flannigan of the *Star*, all standing in a row and gawking at him. No chance to deny his identity; he had summered and wintered with this gang, beaten them and been beaten, drunk with, and slept with them. He grinned feebly.

"Three gorillas were they," he chanted. "Where the devil are you going, and when did you get aboard?"

The trio put their heads together for close harmony, and to the edification of the passengers on the platform and at the train windows they barber-shopped, "California, here I come."

"Tough on California," Phil observed with a sinking heart. This gang were going all the way; they would insist on his society, they would broadcast his name and occupation, and New York would learn exactly what had become of him.

"All aboard," shouted the conductor.

The passengers moved hastily toward the train entrances, and Phil drew in his head and shut down his window.

A FEW seconds later there came a heavy thumping on his door and a cheerful chorus in the corridor. "Open up, old catawumpus. Open this door or we'll break it in."

He picked up his precious suitcase and thrust it under his seat, sighed heavily and unlocked the door, through which pushed the three musketeers. As they entered they were peeling off their coats and tearing off their collars and neckties. Then one of them kicked off his shoes.

"What a break!" exclaimed Lufkin. "A drawing-room all to ourselves all the way to the Coast."

"Now let the welkin ring," sung Flannigan. "This is the life!"

"We are working on the railroad, all the livelong day," began Joe Flinn, and his comrades joined lustily in the second line, "We are working on the railroad, and I'm sure we earn our pay."

They jammed into the seats, thrust their feet upon the arms of the benches, and made themselves just as comfortable as it was possible.

Phil Deckert regarded them with despair.

"What are you going out to the Coast for?" he asked the three plaintively.

"Same reason you are. To report the game. Didn't know the *Mercury* had shifted you over to sports, old hoss."

"They haven't. What game?" asked Phil.

The three stared at him in astonishment.

"Don't you know that Notre Dame is playing Southern California on November 15?" demanded Flinn. "We're out to look the native sons over, shoot back a lot of dope, and then see Notre Dame trim the California rascals about sixty to nothing, just to show them."

"I remember now. I forgot all about it," he stammered.

Lufkin had been squinting at him. "Open up, Deckert," he commented. "What is the idea of all this splendor? No newspaper ever sent a man across the continent alone in a drawing-room. An upper berth is all the rest of us

could manage, and a three-dollar-a-day allowance for eats on the train, which the Lord knows is utterly inadequate."

"I have a month's leave of absence from the *Mercury*," he informed them. "I am going West on a private matter which has nothing to do with newspapers. My expenses are paid, of course, otherwise I'd travel the way you do."

The three eyed him speculatively. A good newspaper man never overlooks a story, and if Phil was working on a big thing, it was their business to find out what it might be and tip off their papers.

While Phil was covering night police he had a big reputation in the past for sleuthing, and he might be working on something that would raise the deuce back in New York. If that were so, Phil Deckert would certainly not blab about it, so the thing to do was to keep their eyes open, not let him out of their sight, and bide their time.

"You've got two berths, Phil. We'll draw lots to see which of us will move in," said Miller.

"I'll be hanged if you do," Phil snapped. "I'm glad to see you boys, and you are welcome to drop in for a visit, but I have work to do on this train, and I propose to spend most of my time locked up here, and I intend to sleep alone."

FLANNIGAN picked up a sheet of paper which had slid off the table and lay on the floor.

"Good heavens," he roared, "Phil is a motion-picture magnate. This paper is covered with figures, and the smallest sum is a hundred thousand."

Phil made to snatch at the paper, but restrained himself. He knew his company.

"Sleep is out," said Lufkin. "We have each got a suitcase full of hootch, and a poker game starts immediately, which will not suspend until we reach

the City of the Angels. Only we need two or three more good fellows."

"Say, look herē!" began Phil.

"If you don't like it, you can get out," Flannigan informed him. "Short sports and welchers not wanted."

Under ordinary circumstances Phil would have been glad of the company of the three sporting writers who were old companions and good fellows, but he had excellent reasons for not wanting them now. There was his suitcase full of treasury notes; Flannigan's toe was resting on it. And there was the girl next door. What would she think when she heard these hoodlums ripping things up in the next compartment?

He knew they were loose talkers and profane; that they drank heavily and got more boisterous with every drink. They were quite sincere in stating that they would play poker until the train rolled into Los Angeles. Phil had participated, more than once, in a game which carried on for two or three days, the players keeping themselves awake by heavy potations and dragging in new performers when one of the regulars fell out of his chair.

They would have no hesitation in chucking him out of the drawing-room if he refused to conform. The camel who kicked his master out of his tent after the kind-hearted Arab let the beast in to take shelter from a sand-storm is probably a newspaper reporter to-day, if the theory of transmigration of souls has anything in it.

Of course, he could summon the train crew and have the outfit ejected from the stateroom. If he did it at once, they might go, but if he delayed too long and they had time to fortify themselves with bootleg, they would wreck the train. It was a dilemma. He cursed himself for peering out of the window. He should have pulled down the curtains and remained hidden at every stop.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

High Line Riders

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Author of "Chigarool" "First Buccaneer," etc.

Fast-riding, fast-shooting King Malloy was an outlaw by habit and by circumstances; but on this mission into the Texas bad lands, law and outlaw alike were battling against him
Novelette—Complete



"They call me Queen of Rustlers' Valley"

CHAPTER I.

THE TEXAS TRAIL.

AS he practiced the quick draw, King Malloy was alert as any old lobo wolf of the Llanos Estacados. He heard every tiny sound in the rickety lodging house. His brown hands flashed down to the walnut stocks of his low-swung Colt .44's; the guns twinkled out—cocked as they came—to menace the air before him. But always he was listening to the creak of ancient floors outside his door; to the lurching footsteps of drunken sailors and longshoremen.

He was of no more than middle height, but tremendously muscled. His red-brown face was square-hewn; hair and brows alike were sun-bleached almost to tow color; his eyes were ice-

blue, wrinkled at the corners, narrow and watchful.

It was his daily exercise, this practice with the .44's. He had been "on the dodge" since his eighteenth year and he was thirty-two now. For fourteen years, then, his freedom had depended upon beating the other fellow to it and, precisely as a juggler maintains his skill by constant practice, so did King Malloy go through his exercises in gunplay for ten or twenty or thirty minutes every day.

Only while in Talus jail waiting trial had his routine been interrupted. The moment he had escaped he had secured his old Colts from Sheriff Clide's office and promptly resumed the daily exercises.

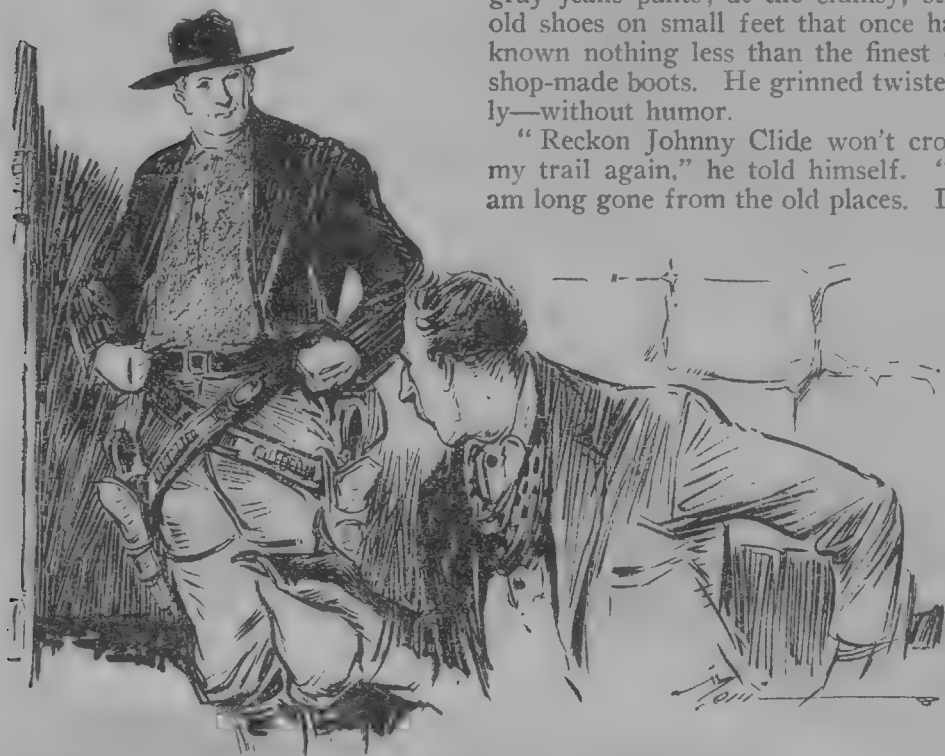
He heard the steady drumming of the rain that pounded San Francisco's

water front; heard every tiny sound outside the door of his room. But so mechanical were gun practice and alert listening both, that neither occupied him wholly.

watchin' cross-eyed and antigodlin' ever' minute o' the trip. A sher'f ought never to figure that because his prisoner's quiet, his prisoner's licked."

He looked down at the shabby sailor jersey he wore; and at the greasy, once gray jeans pants; at the clumsy, stiff old shoes on small feet that once had known nothing less than the finest of shop-made boots. He grinned twistedly—without humor.

"Reckon Johnny Clide won't cross my trail again," he told himself. "I am long gone from the old places. I'll



His thoughts wandered. To the rusty tramp steamer now lying far down the Embarcadero near Islais Creek; tomorrow night she would carry him out of Golden Gate and toward new ventures in Central America. Wandered to the stony face of Judge Efram Randall at Talus, as he sentenced the son of his old friend to a life term in the Texas penitentiary. To the furious, helpless face of Sheriff Clide as that most efficient peace officer stood handcuffed and gagged and covered in the Pullman smoking room, on a day two months past.

"I bet you," King Malloy meditated with twinkling eyes, "that Johnny Clide, next time he starts to the 'pen' with a Long Stretcher, will be

never ride the Texas trail again. Never no more. Never no more—"

HE stiffened, shoulders hunched, the long-barreled .44's swinging around like a magician's trick to cover the doorway into the hall outside. Then he went like a puff of smoke—for all of those clumsy sailor shoes—across the room to a door leading into the adjoining compartment. He opened it and slid through; closed it behind him.

There was a hole in the wall beside this door. In the darkness of the other room, King Malloy squatted on the floor with eye to the peephole, watching the room he had just quitted. He waited tensely, but calmly. And that

tinest of sounds in the hall, which his wolf-keen ears had caught, grew slightly louder, then stopped—just outside the door of the other room. He could see the doorknob move, but, ancient as it was, it turned soundlessly. Suddenly then the door was hurled open. King's wide mouth stretched a trifle.

A long gun barrel had come around the jamb. Now, above it, appeared a brown face, in which jettily twinkled smallish black eyes. King stiffened where he watched, and his face was suddenly grimmer, older. He saw the other's eyes go roving from point to point about the dingy room. Then with pistol muzzle weaving to and fro, a little man in ill-fitting black clothes came gliding inside.

He closed the door behind him and for an instant stood uncertainly. Then he crossed silently to the door through which King had passed and tried its knob. But it was bolted, and he went back to hunker against the wall with pistol on knee—at one side of the hall door.

King watched him unblinkingly. He grinned a little, even, when Johnny Clide mechanically drew Durham and papers from a coat pocket and started to roll a cigarette—then looked down at it suddenly, shook his head and let tobacco and paper sift to the warped floor. Minutes passed; Johnny Clide was moveless as an Apache; patient as—as Johnny Clide.

King had an idea. Noiselessly, he removed his shoes. Noiselessly, also, he unbolted the door between the rooms. Then he had a look at Johnny Clide. He was still hunkered, pistol across knee. King slipped out of the room into the hall and just outside the door of the other room made the old floor squeak; even rattled the knob a little. Then he streaked back and inside and looked through the peephole. Johnny Clide was on his feet, crouching, tight as a bowstring, his eyes on that hall door. King flung open the communicating door.

"Grab a star, Johnny!" he snarled. "Don't want to down you, but—you know damn well I will, if you crowd me!"

Johnny Clide almost turned to face King. But he checked himself and slowly his hands went up. King came up behind him and twitched the Colt from Clide's gun hand. He ran practiced fingers over the sheriff's clothing and removed a shorter hideout—a bulldogged .45.

"Well, well, well!" King remarked, pleasantly. "You told me we'd meet again, but I never took a bit o' stock in it. Turned out, though, you had it right. Got the jewelry on you this time? Ah, here we are! Same old cuffs, too! Reckon I know as much about 'em as you do, by now. Put your hands down nice an' gentle behind you, Johnny. 'At's the boy!"

He stepped back and regarded the sheriff with not unhumorous eyes. Clide turned slowly and looked at him. These two had known of each other for some years and they had a great deal of respect, one for the other.

"THIS won't git yuh nowheres, King," Clide said thickly.

"Yuh ought to know it. Ever' damn bluecoat in Frisco is on yo' trail. I jist sneaked away from 'em on a idee I had: I know yuh right well an' I figured yuh would never have headed for Frisco unless yuh aimed to catch a boat. An' that old Mary Ellen tramp, it hit me as bein' the one yuh'd hop. It wasn't hard to cut yo' trail, once I'd got that far. But these fellas on the force, they're lookin' for yuh—plenty. Now, why'n't yuh quit this foolishness an' come on back to Texas with me? Start in on yo' time an' look to gittin' a pardon after a spell. Yuh'll never make it out o' the country. Yuh might's well start in with a good record. Take these cuffs off me an' cut out bein' rough. I promise yuh I will do ever'thing I can to have it easy for yuh."

"'Twas life they handed me, Johnny. Life!" King Malloy said courteously. "You must've plumb misunderstood an' heard it as six months on the chain gang, or somethin'. Life! An' for killin' Epp¹ Braybury! Figure that! Epp Braybury—crooked gambler, dance hall owner, saloonkeeper, livin' off the money his gang o' girls could get out o' drunken punchers. He had been ripe for the cottonwood prance an' Boot Hill for many days. All I did was make up for the delay."

He swore scornfully, bitterly.

"An' they handed me life! Not for killin' Epp Braybury, really. But because o' my record. Because I was pushed into ridin' with the Battle gang when I was a kid an' it's been said I have had a hand in stickin' up some banks an' trains. Because I have rode the high lines. Because I was a long rider an' have run a lot o' wet stock, by an' large. None o' you would let me alone when I settled there, north o' Talus, though that was all I wanted. Hell's fire! You think any man in his right mind *wants* to be on the dodge? I had fourteen year o' that. I never did like it! That's why I homesteaded the Slash-M. An' Epp Braybury thought he had caught me with my plow handles hung up. You ought to know he would never have tried to go up against King Malloy otherwise. You know damn well he wouldn't 've!"

"I never tried yuh!" shrugged Johnny Clide. "No use bellyachin' now, King. But Epp never had no gun on."

"That's a dirty lie! If you don't know it is, you haven't got sense enough to wad a .22. One o' his outfit slipped his hoglegs off him, after he fell. But—like you say, there's no use bellyachin' now. But if you think I'm goin' back—"

He laughed, and Johnny Clide, looking at him steadily, realized that King Malloy was not the man to go meekly back to serve a life sentence. The sheriff whirled and jumped for

the hall door; turned like a snake and seized the knob in his manacled hands. But King Malloy was no less fast on his feet. He caught the little man by the shoulder and lifted him clear of the floor with one hand; set him gently down again where he had been.

Swiftly he gagged him and, with dirty sheets from the bed, lashed him skillfully, ankles and wrists, to the bed itself. Then he stood looking down sardonically.

"You thought I figured to hop the Mary Ellen!" he said with artful counterfeited amusement. "Well, I did think about it. Then I figgered the Finest would naturally look a boat like that over, pretty close, just on general principles. An' I rigged me another scheme. One none o' you'll guess. S'long, Johnny! Somebody may come up an' turn you loose right soon—but again, they may not. This ain't what you'd call a first-rate hotel. But my rent's due to-morrow night an' they'll be up after it. *Hasta la vista*, Johnny, until I see you again."

Johnny Clide's furious black eyes went with King as the grim-faced outlaw moved about the room gathering his few possessions together for wrapping in a black silk neckerchief. He watched while King unbuckled his shell belts and tossed them into the neckerchief, putting the .44's in shoulder holsters.

"Adios, Johnny!" grinned King at last. "I just can't see bustin' rocks or makin' shoes, for the rest o' my life, on account o' such as Epp Braybury—not even to please you!"

HE vanished from the room and stood close against the wall in the dusky hallway, listening. He heard the bed creak inside the room. Johnny Clide was doing his best to get free. But his best would not be half good enough against those hard-tied Spanish knots. King grinned a little and sneaked down the hall toward the stairhead.

He had remade his plans flashingly, as soon as Clide had shown knowledge of his intention to get out on the Mary Ellen. Knowing nothing of such things as pilots, it occurred to King that if he boarded the tramp out in the bay, from a small boat, as she made for the Golden Gate, his troubles would be over. There would be none but the boatman to carry word back to the police of a hard case leaving Frisco on the Mary Ellen.

He stopped at the head of the stairs and listened. No particular noise downstairs in the lobby. The mumbling of some men sitting on the long bench by the office door; that was all. He went softly down, but stopped abruptly when near the foot. He thought he had seen a broad, blue-clad shoulder in the door opening on the water front. But it was gone so swiftly that he thought himself mistaken. No policeman seen so far moved thus rapidly. He went on down and looked at the sailors sitting on the bench. They barely glanced at him. So he made the door.

It was nearing nine o'clock and a fog was replacing the rain to some degree. The lights across the Embarcadero, along the pier heads, were misty yellow blobs in the darkness. An ideal night for him, King thought.

He started outside, and from the shadows to right and left of the door two big figures stepped swiftly toward him. He halted in his tracks, head going from right to left. The policeman in uniform, all right—on his right. The beefy fellow on his left—a plain-clothes man, of course. They were staring almost into his face.

"Want ye, Malloy!" grunted the plain-clothes man. "Better come along peaceful now. We been watchin' ye—"

The half patronizing words ended in a grunt. The big, slow-moving detective had no experience in dealing with such as King Malloy, creature of desert wilds, as quick of thought and

movement as the four-legged wolves of those savage spaces. The man crumpled like a pole-axed steer under the licking barrel of the .44 that came out of a shoulder holster. The policeman grunted, too—but in alarm. Back under the tails of his long coat went his hand after the pistol that should have been in his hand at the very beginning. King Malloy took one half step toward him and the barrel crunched upon his temple.

There was a cable car *clang-clanging* somewhere in the misty darkness toward Market Street. The sound of the jangling bell gave King an idea. He had stepped forward, reholstering the .44, when another short and thick figure materialized abruptly before him. Again his hand twinkled under the shabby coat. Out came the Colt again, big hammer sliding back under his thumb. But the newcomer held up both hands—and they shone white, oddly white, in the murk of rain and fog, as he spoke sharply:

"King Malloy? Come on! *Por amor de Dios!* This way!"

CHAPTER II.

BLACK ALEC'S BRAND?

KING MALLOY stood like a wolf at bay for an instant. He could not recognize the voice that called him by name so imperatively. A trap? His heavy shoulders, hunched in the gunman's crouch, stiffened a little. If a trap—well, it would be a sad moment for the indistinctly seen man there in the darkness.

"Come on!" said the voice again, more imperatively than before. "King! This is Efram Randall—Judge Randall. You've got to get out of this, and quickly. Come on and we'll argue later. This is no place for talk. I'm helping you, man!"

It seemed unbelievable. The very judge who had sat stonily calm on the bench at Talus, sentencing him to

serve the remainder of his natural life in the penitentiary, now appearing like a ghost from the shadows of the San Francisco water front and offering to help a convicted, escaped criminal—But King went with him, around a corner and up a wet, slippery street, the beginning of Telegraph Hill; around another corner and another and yet another. But he did not reholster his .44.

In the dusky doorway the judge halted, breathing heavily. King waited. The dodging sprint had hardly quickened his own breath, for he was hard as nails from two months of flight—afoot, on stolen horses, on freight trains.

"Now, I've got an apartment up here on Sacramento Street. We can make it without any one seeing you, I think," the judge explained. "You can put away the hogleg—or keep it in your hand. Suit yourself. I can't blame you for caution here."

King kept the Colt in his hand, but oddly, already he had lost suspicion to some degree. He followed up Sacramento and into a dim lit hallway; up a stairway—merely sizing up the place and marking the exits. The judge unlocked a door and went inside without a glance back. After a moment King trailed him. He stood within the door, back to a wall, to stare.

Judge Randall he had known as a small boy. But when King's father, Buck Malloy, had been assassinated and the Diamond-M had been taken over by the bank, King had become a homeless young saddle tramp. He had drifted up and down Texas; over into Arizona and New Mexico; to Utah. He had not seen the judge again until the days of his homesteading near Talus. But he recalled what Buck Malloy had said—that Efram Randall was a man to tie to; a man whose word was good as any bond.

The judge waited, his quiet, dark eyes a little humorous. Then he motioned to a big leather chair, and King,

shrugging the shoulders of his spirit, closed the door into the hallway and came on inside. He looked hard at the judge's pale, clear-cut face and reholstered the Colt. Then he sat down.

"You want to come back to Texas?" the judge asked abruptly. "On a secret parole issued by the Governor?"

"What would he be parolin' me for?" King demanded, hard of blue eyes. "What 'd I get out o' it? I'm free now."

"You are. And I know of few men more likely to remain so. But you don't want to stay on the dodge. Nor do you want to become an exile from your own country, I think."

"*Dios mio!*" cried King, with grim amusement. "Mary Ellen is certainly a name mighty well known to Texans! First, it was Johnny Clide. Now you. I s'pose the Governor knows I was figurin' to take the Mary Ellen to Panama to-morrow night!"

"I knew that Clide had a lead on you—for San Francisco. I merely trailed him and to-night watched him go into your room in that lodging house. I—listened at the door. Then went on downstairs. All because I wanted to ask you to do me a favor."

"I don't know why I'd do you a favor," King said frankly. "Not that I'm blamin' you for sendin' me up. 'Twas the jury I would like to land on. That was a put-up job—their verdict. But right now I'm thinkin' o' my neck, naturally. Why should I take a parole an' come back—likely to do time, later on?"

THREE weeks ago," the judge said slowly, "five men rode into Tonto. Nobody seems to have seen them until—afterward. But ride in they did. Must have. Johnny McGilvray, the express messenger, with Bill Tredegar, of the express office, were unloading ninety thousand dollars in nice, new, unsigned bills, when these five men swooped down on them in broad daylight—about three in the

afternoon, it was. There was a short, hot fight. Johnny McGilvray is both red-headed and Irish and would as soon fight nine men as one man."

He stopped, and somehow King felt that he was preserving his air of calmness only by a strong effort. King waited.

"Johnny got a bullet through the neck and a furrow in his scalp. Tredegar was literally shot to pieces. Olmstead, the cashier, trying to take a hand from the bank's window, was shot through the head. The five men—of whom nobody seems to have got a usable description—scooped up the packages of bills. A townsman looked through his door. They riddled him for no reason. They went out of Tonto hell-bent and—just vanished. The very horses they rode were stolen. The posse discovered them, not twenty miles from town, abandoned. Bar-U-Bar stock, they were."

"A neat job," King nodded when the judge stopped. "That is, all but the senseless killin'. That kind o' puts this gang in a different class. A good little *buscadero*, judge, he tries to get along with no more killin' than he has to do. But some o' the gangs are right cold-blooded; this was one like that."

"You know a great deal about criminals, don't you?"

"Plenty! I ought to. I have ridden on just such jobs as this. No use my lyin' about it. But there was never any killin' on any stick-up I was in. Happened that way. I have downed some men. But usually hard cases that come pickin' trouble."

"I told the Governor that you were the one man who knew enough of outlaws—and yet could be trusted!—to track down the Tonto robbers! He agreed, if reluctantly. I have here a parole for one King Malloy. It will be a full and unconditional pardon, if the Tonto robbers are by the said King Malloy delivered dead or alive, with sufficient proof to convict, to any local

or State officer. Does that interest you?"

"Judge!" drawled King Malloy, leaning forward, "what's up? What's back o' this? You're not so damn anxious to see a bunch o' bank robbers an' murderers doin' the prance, or visitin' the Big House that it'd make you go chasin' down to Austin talkin' the Governor into promisin' me a pardon. What's the song an' dance behind it?"

"My nephew; Art Thomas, is in Tonto jail, charged with complicity in the robbery," Judge Randall said grimly. "As matters stand at present, he is scheduled to be convicted. That means either a long prison term or—He's not only the wild son of my baby sister, King; he's engaged to a girl who is dearer to me than he is; a girl whom I've always regarded as a daughter."

"What's on him? How come they charge him with the deal?"

"He has been pretty wild. Gambling. Losing money. Getting heavily in debt. He was seen talking with some rough customers two days before the robbery. He knew exactly how much money was due and when it would arrive. He and the cashier were the only ones with that knowledge. The only ones in Tonto. He took a three-days' leave against the cashier's wishes. Was very insistent; sulkily so. He said he wanted to go hunting and he was going hunting—and be damned to the cashier."

"That all?" King asked, for Judge Randall had stopped, as he checked off on his fingers the last of the points of evidence.

"Not quite. I said that no usable description was available. But old Tom-Jack Reddin, the storekeeper, caught a glimpse of the gang galloping out of town after the robbery. He won't commit himself absolutely, but he saw a rider of Art Thomas's general description among the robbers. A man with something white around his neck. And when Art was caught, it

was within a mile of the abandoned horses and—he had a handkerchief tied around a scratch on his neck.”

KING rolled a cigarette and whistled long and liquidly. He regarded the judge with an ominous head-shaking. Then:

“Listen, judge,” he said sympathetically. “I can *sabe* how this makes you feel. An’ I don’t know a thing I can say that ’ll cheer you up—except to hope that the jury tryin’ him is not the same kind that tried me! For they got plenty to hang him with, if they feel thataway. You know that!”

“That’s why I went to the Governor when I thought of you, King. Knowing the outlaws as you do, you can possibly identify those connected with this job. Art swore to me that he was not in any way, direct or indirect, connected with the crime. I believe him. I want to believe him, of course. If he is really guilty, your investigation would probably show that. If so, I’ll move not so much as a finger to save him. I told the Governor that. He is very bitter about this affair. He and Olmstead went to university together.”

King Malloy blew a puff of smoke downward and stared at the toes of his shoes. It lured him, this prospect of matching wits against such Long Riders as he could think of; men not easily beaten in any sort of battle. The reward—freedom to go and come as he choose in his own State, his own country—was in his eyes tremendous. And he had no sympathy whatever with these grim killers, who had wantonly shot down a staring townsman.

As he had told the judge, he had in his wild, bitter and reckless youth ridden on raiding expeditions with the *buscaderos*. He had worked for ranchers who paid a bonus of eight or ten dollars for every “slick-ear” brought in by their riders. He had run “wet” cattle and horses over the Mexican line for sale in the States.

But, for all that he had been often

on the law’s left hand, he could never forget that the Malloys had been tall men in Texas since before the revolution. He was fundamentally—now, at least—a law-abiding man. When he had homesteaded the Slash-M, he had asked nothing but an opportunity to become a peaceable rancher in the Talus country.

“I’m sorry, judge,” he said slowly, after awhile. “But I—I just can’t do a thing for you. There are men ridin’ the high lines that I couldn’t like a bit better if they was brothers o’ mine. Men as square as you’d find between this an’ over where the winds come from. Got pushed into the Long Riders’ life—same as I was. I can’t turncoat on ’em, just because I left that life to go straight. Sorry, but—that’s flat.”

The judge argued desperately. King Malloy shrugged heavy shoulders wearily. He felt tired. That pardon, dangling before his inner eye, was a tantalizing thing. But he was stubborn, and he knew that his attitude was the right and decent one. Suddenly, at a certain phrase the judge let drop, King straightened and looked sharply at him. He had only half heard what Judge Randall said.

“They found a pocket knife,” the judge repeated. “A boy saw one of the robbers drop it. It had an odd—trademark, I guess you’d call it—burned on the stag handle. A rectangular box with something like part of an X inside. It was worn; the marks were not clear. The sheriff of Tonto County took possession of it.”

“Like part of an X?” King said in a slow, thickened voice. He was leaning stiffly forward now. His red-brown face had gone white and his narrowed eyes were merest slits; the knuckles of his big hands shone pasty-white with the grip he had upon his knees. Judge Randall stared at him, fascinated.

“Like part of an X, judge? Could it have been a half diamond? You see that knife yourself, judge?”

The judge brought out pencil and memorandum book. Swiftly he sketched a rectangle and within it, pencil slowing now as he frowned, he drew a raggedy V on its side. Then he shook his head slowly and shrugged at King Malloy, who watched tensely.

"Might have been. But to be quite honest, it might have been an X with half of it worn away. I can't say. Why?"

"If Black Alec made that—if 'twas his brand—his knife—if 'twas his gang—The killin' part o' the robbery was like his work. Judge! I'm givin' you a picture o' a hairpin changin' his mind. You see, Long Riders have got secret signs, an' smoke an' picture an' telegraph codes. Ever' man has got his brand. Black Alec's is a Box-Half-Diamond. An'—I sent Black Alec word, two years back, that I would kill him on sight."

He stared blankly and ferociously at the wall beyond the judge. For him it was a picture frame. He could see happy-go-lucky little Frank Wilson, whom Black Alec had killed from behind, for the sake of Frank's share of a poker winning. King had hunted his *compañero's* killer for a year, but Black Alec had managed to stay out of sight. Now—He turned to the judge.

"You keep that parole in your pocket. I'll head back to Texas in my own time, my own way. I'll look into this business. Maybe I won't do a damn thing for you. If I don't, I'll send you word I'm hightailin' again. But if Black Alec turned the trick, I'll bring that crowd in an' heave 'em down at your feet an' collect my pardon. The State won't be bothered about tryin' 'em, either! For I'll bring 'em in dead—they pack better that way, anyhow! Black Alec murdered my side kick."

"But, suppose some peace officer, looking for you, picks you up?" frowned the judge, doubtfully. "Don't you think—"

"He'll think he's picked himself a double handful o' cactus!" King Malloy said grimly. "Oh, I won't hurt anybody if I can possibly help it. But, you see, judge, I got to ride the high lines like a man the whole State is chasin'. If you want to have me dead, just you let loose a lil bitsy word about that parole! You can go crawlin' between the soogans that evenin', figurin' that I'm lyin' out somewhere, starin' up at the lovely golden moon—but not seein' it at all!"

"Suit yourself, of course. I don't pretend to dictate the course of action that will be best. You should know."

"I do know!" King Malloy said grimly. "Robbin' is the oldest profession in the world. It'd be funny if a tight organization hadn't sprung up in five-six thousand year. An' grapevine telegraphs are all over the country—for all the sher'fs can do! I'll be skippin' out o' this an' cuttin' stick for Texas, judge. I will try to let you know anything you need to know. An' I hope I'll find out that your nephew is clean. 'Dios!'"

He was erect and at the door, grinning. Then—he was gone.

CHAPTER III.

"THE TOUGH BUNCH."

A WINCHESTER *whanged*. King looked sidewise up the slope toward Lookout Rock. He reined in Satan as a bullet skipped across the trail before the yellow horse. King was no longer in the rough sailor clothing. A new black Stetson was on the back of his tow head. New, also, were flannel shirt and brown duck trousers and tan half boots. But the twin walnut-handled .44's, at his thighs in tied-down holsters, these were his old and tested companions, like the saddle and .44 carbine and Satan, the longlegged horse.

He waited, palm up and out, for that outlaw sentry on the Rock. It was a

matter of form. Twelve months of the year some Long Riders' outfit used the old stone cabin in what was known from Wyoming to the Rio Grande as "Lost Cabin Hideout." Hard-eyed men; quick-triggered; men who rode the "high lines" when they moved. Lookout Rock was known to all of them.

A .45-90 barrel came sliding like a blue-brown snake from a clump of brush uphill twenty feet from King. Half absently, King was singing that lament of outland men known from the Selkirks away to the Old Trail of southern Mexico:

"No tengo tabaco!
No tengo papel!
No tengo dinero!
Oh! What the hell!"

Copper-colored were the hands of the sentry. A thick forefinger was cuddling the trigger of the rifle. King's eyes narrowed—you might think that hairpin was about to let go.

"Who you?" a guttural voice demanded, a truculent kind of voice, that assured King he dealt now with an Indian.

"King Malloy!" he grunted. He did not fancy those Indians he had seen among Long Rider outfits—Osages, Comanches, Cherokees or mixtures. Too savage; too uncertain. "Don't get so nervous with that trigger, fella! Who's at the cabin?"

"Damn—tough—bunch! Why I no down you, huh?"

"Listen!" King said more grimly still. "Where the hell was you raised? You tryin' to tell me you never heard o' me? Never heard o' Battle's outfit? Who's in this tough bunch?"

"No hear o' King Malloy! Don't give a damn! No hear o' Battle. Don't give a damn! Me Osage Charley. Bad man. Better I kill you now!"

King knew that he was actually on the ragged edge of death. This sullen, bloodthirsty Osage believed that a dead man was a safe man. Evidently he was

sentry for some hard case outfit holed up in Lost Cabin; some bunch to whom King Malloy was unknown. Strangers were potential spies.

"Who's he?" King demanded suddenly.

"Hah?" Osage Charley's head jerked about. The rifle muzzle wavered and out came the Colts from King's holsters. The .44's roared—right hand; left hand. Osage Charley howled.

He had a twice-hit gun hand; and with a surge, Satan went forward. King bent from the saddle and cracked Charley over the head with a Colt barrel. For an instant King looked dourly down, then turned to whistle Poma, his chunky white pack-horse.

"A tough bunch?" King said between his teeth. "By the powers! I'll have somethin' to say about their puttin' a fool Indian on watch!"

He rode on up the trail to its crest and where it turned to dip into the lovely, hidden little valley, he drew rein.

"Come out, you fellas!" he said quietly. "There's just the one o' me. I left your sentry back yonder—an' a hell of a lookout he turned out to be—no sense; no salt; nothin'!"

"Who the hell you think you are, poppin' yo' mouth off so free?" snarled a squat, black man, coming out from behind a bowlder with Winchester half raised. "Charley's my man—"

"You'd be sayin' 'was,' if I wasn't so soft-hearted," King replied sinisterly. "Most men 'd have killed him."

The squat leader of the Tough Bunch had the advantage. King watched with small, contemptuous smile, thumbs hooked in cartridge belts. He had to draw to get into action. But the dark man waived the advantage of his pointing Winchester.

"MY name's Malloy. Your Charley says he never heard o' me. The rest o' you-all green in this country, too?"

"We're from the Osage country.

Up there they call me 'Two Fingers.' Things got too cluttered up with U. S. marshals an' their likes. So we lit a shuck this way. We knowed about Lost Cabin from other Riders. About the Rustlers' Valley."

"Well, if you-all play the dam' fool like you done here," King said scornfully, "you'll last in Rustlers' Valley about as long as a tissue paper pup in hell! We got our ways down here an' outsiders fit into 'em nice an' polite—or else—"

"Say! You waggle that slit under yo' nose a lot!" a new voice remarked angrily. "You—"

"Come out from behind that rock if you want to wah-wah wi' me!" King invited him. "Come out an' let's see how high you stand an' what you heft, dressed!"

"Hold in yo' hawses, Creek!" the squat, dark leader snapped as a huge, red-faced, ferociously mustached man bounded into the open. "I never hear o' this hairpin Malloy before, but he acts like one o' our kind. What's yo' road sign, Malloy?"

"Box-in-a-Box," King shrugged indifferently. "Let's go on down to the cabin. Oh! Tell yo' war-whoop sentry not to start paintin' for war—not unless he's certain he wants war!"

"You go take sentry, Creek," Two Fingers ordered. "Come on down, Malloy. Muskogee Jack's cookin', an' my other boy, Whitey, he's a movin' the hawses. We been here two days, restin' up. Aimed to head for the Valley-to-morrow. Sent word down to Wolf Whitlow, an' he says to come on. He's got somethin' big up his sleeve. Way he talked to Whitey, it's a real fat hen he has got on. He wants us all to pile onto it. Plenty *dinero*!"

King nodded absently. Since he had passed the fringes of lawless land, he had considered himself a detective at work. But not a word of really definite information had he received on the Tonto bank robbery. Either the nesters and occasional Long Riders en-

countered on the trails knew nothing of the outfit responsible for that job, or else King's two years of honesty had reared a barrier between him and them.

But he had not been able to find a difference in their treatment of him. They seemed to remember him as King Malloy of the amazingly fast gunplay; the man who had ridden with the hard-case Battle outfit in the past; finally, as a convicted lifer who had made a monkey out of that famous officer, Bulldog Johnny Clide.

He had begun to wonder if the Tonto job had been the work of some outside gang. If so—why not of this Tough Bunch? He thought that Osage Charley, Creek, or Two Fingers here would be quite capable of that robbery—including the cold-blooded killing of a curious man, who had merely looked out of his door.

In part, his high-handed manner with these newcomers was a pose. It was his most effective mask and shield in the detective work that lay before him. But only in part did he assume it. For a Battle man was a tall man in Long Riders' company; old Jim Battle had been admittedly a leading light.

"Don't you worry about Creek, Malloy," Two Fingers said suddenly. "He's kind o' loose-holstered, but—"

"You just pass the word along to friend Creek that if any worryin' has got to be done, he better be worryin' about me!"

Two Fingers flushed hotly at the careless, arrogant reply. He glared up sidelong at King and his hands twitched on the Winchester. Then suddenly he grinned—a catlike lip-stretching. He was silent after that, until they came to the Lost Cabin.

Muskogee was a larger edition of Two Fingers. He nodded curtly to King—who ticketed him flashingly as one twice as dangerous as the loud-mouthed Creek. Whitey, who had been wrangling the Tough Bunch's saddlers,

came singing in, a loose-lipped and tow-haired youth with wide-set and pale blue eyes.

AFTER supper Whitey went up to stand watch. Creek came in and ate without a word for King. Two Fingers kept furtive watch on them both. Osage Charley did not come in. King wondered at that. Two Fingers began to brag of the hard name the Tough Bunch had, back in their own country. King gave his own history very briefly. Toward the last of it he was listening to a small sound outside the cabin.

"You know Wolf Whitlow?" Two Fingers asked King in an odd tone.

"I know Wolf, an' he sure as hell knows me! He—"

The small cabin window was shrouded with a blanket. Its wooden shutter was opened flat against the outer wall. Now that Muskogee's cooking fire had died down, two tallow candles gave the only light. King saw the corner of the blanket come pushing silently in. A most natural movement, but—

King owned the instinctive alertness of a wolf. He hurled himself sidewise as a .45-90 barrel thrust inside. The rifle roared, the bullet splatting against the wall where King had been. He had jerked his right-hand gun as he went sidewise. His Colt bellowed twice, then he snuffed the candles with three more shots.

"I—I never hear' nothin', but—he's gone!" cried Creek, when, after an extended silence he ventured to scratch a match.

"So's your Osage Charley!" King informed them grimly, from outside. "Any kick—about that murderin' feather duster?" he inquired, coming in with Colt spinning on a forefinger.

"No kick!" They shrugged, in turn, as they met his hard blue eyes. "He shot at you."

Creek suddenly grinned. He went quickly outside and came back with a homemade canvas money-belt. And

King, knowing it came from the dead Indian, was highly interested. If it held a lot of bills, now— But there was only four hundred in gold. He watched them divide it, then grinned and proposed a game of draw. They grinned at each other and agreed.

But as the evening wore on and Muskogee relieved Whitey at the Lookout, they ceased to grin. For they were facing a man whose poker was like his gunplay. Muskogee had dropped a couple of hundred; Creek quit when he was even farther behind; Two Fingers announced himself cured at the same moment.

"Have to let it shift to blackjack," King grinned at the eager Whitey. "Suit you, young fella?"

So blackjack it was—and of a quality equal to King's poker. Presently Whitey was clean. None of the others would let him borrow. He was crazy to gamble. King refused to play for his horse, saddle, or weapons. And Whitey reached abruptly into a pocket and jerked out a locketlike frame of massy gold.

King stared. It held a picture—of a girl no more than seventeen, black-haired, with large dark eyes set well apart.

"Won it in Whisky Cabin, in Rustlers' Valley, yesterday," Whitey grinned. "She's right the', too—got a busted arm. But when that cures up, I bet Zalma 'll have trouble holdin' up her end. Zalma has been Queen o' Rustlers' Valley, an' she don't fancy this Molly-gal none. Do'no' why this Wolf Whitlow fetched Molly in—but that whole damn valley's too tangled up for me, Malloy! Gi' me twenty on it!"

King won, and turned the picture over moodily in his hand. She was black-headed and pretty as a red wagon. But hell! To him had come rumors of this Zalma, favorite of lank, murderous, foxy Wolf Whitlow. And this Molly was doubtless just another painted lady and rival of the

queen. He turned in, but he was not able to forget this girl.

HE was thinking of her next morning, on the trail, as the Tough Bunch rode toward Rustlers' Valley. Painted lady, of course, but—somehow he was anxious to see her. Whitey rode beside him and talked freely. Curly Al's bunch was in the valley, he said. Ike Seegrew's, also, from the Blue Mountains. Seven men; counting Curly Al, eight. Three men of Wolf's brought the tally to eleven. Whitey had never heard of Black Alec, nor of the Tonto bank robbery.

King pondered this. Black Alec and Wolf were old friends—purely in a business way. The questions King asked himself about Black Alec somehow began to include Wolf, for Wolf was boss of Rustlers' Valley, shrewd schemer of raids on which he did not ride. He took his cut of the spoils and gained most of the Long Riders' shares indirectly, from the gambling and drinking done at Whisky Cabin.

Question: If Black Alec had pulled the Tonto job, why was he not in Rustlers' Valley now, on a spree? Question: Where was he now? Question: Had Wolf planned the Tonto job? And—question: Who was this lovely girl, Molly?

Whitey said that Wolf had ridden out some time back, with one Jake and one Jodey. Coming back from some place unknown, they had been accompanied by Molly—who had a broken arm. She had been put in a cabin up the hill from Whisky Cabin. But she had shown no favor toward the men of the valley. Zalma, a big, yellow-haired and green-eyed woman, had not been pleased. She was drinking a good deal, Whitey had heard.

An hour or so before sunset a little man on a chestnut of near race-horse quality yelled at King. He turned his mount and gossiped of Long Riders. But King sensed an invisible barrier reared between himself and Jake Bal-

lew, his old *compañero*. He asked about the Tonto job carelessly, and Jake shrugged:

"Neat job—sounded like. But yuh better ask Wolf—anything—yuh—want—to—know. Wait an' ask him, will yuh?"

King wondered suddenly if that parole could have got on the grapevine. If so—well, King Malloy would never use it! But he hardly thought it possible. Something else was in the wind. He shrugged; he had expected this to be a hard job.

They rode into the valley and saw the lines of stone and wood cabins. Approaching the square Whisky Cabin, King saw a woman stepping out of a doorway; tall, shapely, in vivid purple.

"Queen o' Rustlers' Valley," said Jake in an odd tone.

CHAPTER IV.

KING MALLOY STUBS HIS TOE.

"YEH, we heard all about your downin' Epp Braybury an' how his friends packed the jury on you," nodded Wolf Whitlow.

He slouched low in his big half-barrel chair, watching King expressionlessly, where King sat on the floor with his back to the stone wall of the back room of Whisky Cabin—a part of Whitlow's living quarters.

"Pablo Chacon—Pablo's around some'er's now—an' Jake, they was organized to ride down to Talus, a good, dark night, an' rope that jail an' pull her up by the roots—even though you *had* cut stick from us. Then we heard they'd started you sudden for the Big House. Next come word you had stuck up Bulldog Johnny Clide an' hightailed. That sucker, Pablo, he says he figured you'd do ex-act-ly that. It tickled him plenty."

"Pablo is a *buen amigo* o' mine," King grinned. "But it tickled me to get away from Bulldog Johnny. You

know, he's not the peace officer I'd personally pick to chase me. When I saw him in that Frisco roomin' house—well, I like to bust my habits wide open an' give him a .44 to chew on."

"Too bad you never," Wolf shrugged, without change in his lean, brown face, but with sudden shine of gray eyes. "I say don't be too squeamish. Bulldog Johnny's a good sher'f—too good to be let live. He'll collect a bunch o' us yet."

"He's on Black Alec's trail now," King lied artfully. He made a cigarette. "For that Tonto job."

"I never heard that," Wolf said in surprised tone. "I cert'nly never. Where'd you have that story, King?"

"When I doubled back from Frisco I stopped at Talus to get Satan off a friend. Got kind o' reckless an' sneaked into Tonto after dark. I'd heard a little about the robbery, but without hearin' who done it. Sounded like Alec—downin' the man in the door was like him. But, o' course, I didn't know. Happened to see Bulldog Johnny in Tonto. Trailed him a spell an' listened underneath the window while he was talkin' to Ray Bruce, his deputy there. Johnny says he knows 'twas Black Alec. He's goin' to heel him—an' run me down, too."

All of which was truth—except for the part about Johnny Clide's suspicion of Black Alec.

"Is this Art Thomas they got in the calaboose s'posed to be hooked up with Alec?" frowned Wolf.

"Just a stall! Johnny good as told Ray Bruce that Art Thomas never had a thing to do with the deal, an' that there's nothin' against him. Which," King snarled suddenly, between his teeth, "is just too bad! You see, Thomas is Judge Randall's nephew. An' he's engaged to marry a girl the judge thinks a hell-slew of. If Thomas was to go before a jury like that—un that tried me—well, Judge Randall he wouldn't feel so fine!"

He glowered straight ahead—but

managed to watch Wolf's stony face the while. If Wolf were for some reason suspicious of him, King thought that he had him guessing now. He wondered what little Jake was up to—and Pablo Chacon, who was by chance a Mexican, but, by everything of importance, a Man. A salty hairpin; a good friend and a bad enemy. And one King could trust with his life, which meant—with his secret.

"Well," King grunted, "I got Satan an' Poma an' some lil articles o' steel an' leather. When I put my hat on, my roof is shingled. What you got on that I can mix into, Wolf? I don't have to read you my record—not after ten years."

"Not a thing, right now," Wolf said absently. "Wonder how come Bulldog Johnny thinks Alec done the Tonto job? If he had done it, I would know about it. Cert'nly I would! An' Alec's clean over above Gunter on a cattle deal. I give him the scheme on it. Ah, hell! I'd know about the Tonto job!"

He looked abruptly straight at King, the grim-faced, who seemed to be thinking of something far away.

"**Y**OU'RE no friend to Alec," Wolf charged

"Why, I did see red the time he downed Frank Wilson. I would have rubbed out Alec's chalk mark any time inside the year—an' I'm right free an' frank to admit it to you, Wolf—if he hadn't been so careful to keep out o' reach. It wouldn't hurt my feelin's a bit, right now, to hear about his funeral. But if you're wonderin' about my tellin' about Johnny Clide bein' on Alec's trail—"

He smiled—like one who visualizes a pleasant scene.

"First place, no matter what I wanted to do back yonder, Alec's one o' the Tribe. Johnny Clide's on the other side o' the fence—our fence. He is a sher'f. He's on my trail. Between the two o' these, naturally, I'm against Bulldog Johnny. It won't make a bit

o' difference whether Alec done the trick at Tonto. If Johnny gets his hooks into Alec, he's got plenty other charges to hang him on. But Alec won't be taken alive. An' he might down Johnny in the deal. Either way, whether he busts Johnny or Johnny busts him, it's no skin off my nose."

He got up and stretched. And the big, shapely woman in purple came silently through a door at Wolf's back and looked at him with the oddest pair of long, green eyes that he had ever met.

From the tip of his dusty hat to the toes of his Justins, she seemed to analyze him, feature by smallest feature; and suddenly she smiled. As Whitey had said, she was lovely.

"Yo' tastes in ladies, Wolf, is certainly improvin'," King grinned; and Wolf jerked his head about to stare. Then he shrugged carelessly.

"That's Zalma. The boys call her—"

"Queen o' Rustlers' Valley," she finished. "You're King Malloy. Heard a lot about you, King. Some just a little bit ago—from that Tough Bunch you shepherded in. They say you're hell on wheels, fella. Wolf says the same."

"Yeh, I was raised up on barb' wire an' dynamite an' cow-town whisky," he grinned. "Cut my teeth on a pair o' Colt cutters."

"Come on out to the bar an' I'll let you buy me a drink," she invited him. "It 'll make Wolf jealous, you see, an' that 'll make me happy. He's hell when he's roused—Wolf is."

Wolf grinned absently. Behind his amused expression King was wondering just what undercurrent ran here. He sensed more than the aimless words seemed to say. Then a thought came—the girl with the broken arm, whose picture he had in his pocket.

"Wolf will never kick so long's it jingles his cash drawer," he laughed. "Come on, lady friend! I have got several twenties that used to weight

down that famous Tough Bunch from the nations. Come on out an' le' me blow some on you. Wolf, if you happen to miss us later on, you'll know I kidnaped Zalma an' we've hit for Santone or Dallas. We—"

Through the door in which Zalma had appeared a slim figure in shabby plaid skirt and a man's old flannel shirt came running. Her left arm was beneath the shirt. She was pale, either from the broken arm, or from some more recent cause; one could not tell which.

She streaked over to Wolf Whitlow and cowered close to him. King felt Zalma stiffen beside him.

"One of those men jumped into the kitchen and grabbed at me," the girl gasped. "He—he almost caught me."

"Well, for Gawd's sake!" cried Zalma. "A fine little touch-me-not you turned out to be! An' if you don't want some o' the boys playin' in your back yard, what the hell d' you sit at the window for, oglin' 'em an' grin-nin' like a damn chessy cat? Aw, you make me sick! Get back in that kitchen!"

"I don't sit at the window; and I'm not going back to the kitchen. He might be there now. He was drunk. I know he was."

"Listen!" Zalma snarled, taking a step toward her with hand uplifted. "Don't you be givin' me back talk. I'll pop your jaws for you. Where you goin', Wolf? You come on back, now, an' let her get out like I told her to. Don't you go hornin' in! Serve her right if one o' the boys does grab her—an' her tryin' to act like she'd mind it. Yes, she would—like hell! Aw, you—"

But Wolf was already gone, and his grim voice sounded somewhere in the rear. He was very obviously laying down the law to some one. He came back and grinned at the black-haired girl.

"It's a' right now, Molly," he told

her. "He's gone an'—I don't really expect he'll come back. If he does, you just tell me, an' I *know* he won't show up again."

"**C**OME on! Let's get that drink!" Zalma told King. "I need somethin' to take the taste o' that out o' my mouth."

"See you some more, King," nodded Wolf. "You're stickin' around, o' course? We can mebbe put a hen on, somewhere."

King nodded carelessly and slid an arm through Zalma's. She smiled up at him mechanically, but as they went out into the square barroom he caught her looking furtively back and frowning.

He wondered what she saw. In his turn, he looked that way and discovered that it had been what Zalma failed to see that irked her. For Wolf had gone from the room. Zalma was muttering almost soundlessly. She caught King's glance and again the mechanical woman-of-pleasure's smile twisted her red mouth.

"Honey, I'm certainly glad you showed up!" she said. And it seemed to him that there was a note of sincerity in her voice. "I—well, is that good enough for you? That I'm glad?"

"I never was hoggish!" he assured her. "Plenty is always enough for me. What's the trouble with that kid? Seems like a lot has happened in the last couple years, since I was in here the last time. Just one white woman in the valley then."

"Aw, Wolf makes me damn sick an' tired!" she snarled. Then to the bartender, a big, crippled ex-Rider: "Whisky, Ed—an' straight." She tossed it off like a man, scowling: "He's always favorin' her. I'd take the hide off her with a bullwhip, if I had my way. Mealy-mouthed, pretendin' she's so damn nice none o' the boys can come inside a hundred yards o' her—an' Wolf backin' her up!"

"How long you been in here?"

"Me? Must 've come right after you pulled out. Goin' on two year. I met Wolf in Dallas, an' you know when he annexes hisself a bunch o' store clothes he looks like ready money. It fooled me plenty. I was a damn fool ever to leave Dallas for this! An' now he comes rammin' *that* down my neck. Don't you go sneakin' off with that bottle, Ed! Gawd knows whisky's the only friend a person's got in this forsaken place. Come on, King, let's go over to that table yonder. Wolf says you been out to the Coast. I was in Frisco once. Come on an' talk—I got two empty ears. What wouldn't I give to hear the cable cars come janglin' up Sacramento on a foggy night—"

King wondered if he could get her off guard. He looked over the men in the big room. Two Fingers and the others of the Tough Bunch were at the far end of the bar, near Whisky Cabin's door. They were fraternizing with five men who were obviously Curly Al's gang, for the big curly-headed man "with a yelling laugh" was dominant figure of the group.

Two Fingers and Muskogee Jack turned a little to watch King and the attractive Zalma. They were oddly malicious—and pleased—smiles. But when Zalma reached up to catch King's shoulder and they moved off together, to the table the woman had indicated, both lost their smiles. They seemed puzzled. They turned back to Curly Al to say something in a low tone. He looked at King; he scowled uncertainly. Then he shrugged:

"Damn' if I know, but—just you all wait. That's all!"

KING kept the bottle close to Zalma, without making it an obvious thing. She drank steadily and seemed not to notice that King's glass went infrequently to the bottle. He was studying her, but also he was mulling over all the cross-

currents he had noted since arrival in the valley.

"Well, why don't you fix it up to send that kid back to wherever she come from?" he said at last, as if surprised.

She had reverted to her original grievance—the strange weakness and partiality of Wolf Whitlow for this skinny, black-headed kid he had brought in some two months before.

"Fat chance I got!" she sniffled. "He's aimin' to shove me off! I know him! An' for such as that!"

"Where'd she come from?" he asked in idly interested tone.

"Oh, back over the hills somewhere. Who gives a whoop?"

It seemed to him that the men at the bar were entirely too interested in one King Malloy and his lady companion. They were forever turning sidewise for furtive glances. There was strain in the air, very evident to one so sensitive as King.

"When's Black Alec comin' back?" he said after awhile, in a tone he tried to make utterly indifferent—as if the thought had just come into his mind.

She raised her head from the table. "Do'no'. You never come up huntin' him?"

"He never could win at cards," King grinned mechanically. "An' he ought to be right lousy with *dinero*, with all the jobs he's been pullin'. That's where I'd get mine."

She had cheek on round arm, and the long, green eyes were upon his face. She was smiling in a way that suddenly he didn't like. She drummed on the table with long fingers.

"Fella!" she told him abruptly. "You're a right foxy customer, but you can't fool Zalma! Not—a—little—bit! I heard you tell Wolf you would 've downed Alec a couple years back. Like you'd got over that. You can handle yo' voice an' yo' hands—an' yo' face even. But you can't handle yo' eyes, fella! An' you ain't fool-

in' me at all. You come up here lookin' for Alec an' nobody else! You ain't softened to him a bit. An' you'd like to know—I don't know why, yet—if he pulled that Tonto robbery. You thought I'd get ory-eyed an' tell you. Well, you got fooled, now didn't you?"

She was on her feet now, somewhat unsteady but quite clear of mind, he thought ruefully. She wagged a triumphant forefinger at him.

He smiled easily up at her: "I never hunt an argument with a lady, because the's no use in it. So whatever you please to think—"

But, blank as was his face, watching her to go back toward Wolf Whitlow's quarters, he was cursing inwardly: "Might 've guessed she was a copper-riveted tank!"

CHAPTER V.

WOLF PUTS A HEN ON.

THE cabin was dark. King had reached its wall as silently as a big cat. He crouched in the moonless darkness beside it and listened. What he expected to hear he hardly knew. Hardly the sounds of any one following him. He knew of none in that valley who could have trailed him as he moved up, then back, its length, before deciding to come here.

He got up after a few moments and prowled around the four walls. As he passed a small, closed window, he leaned to put his ear close to it. And suddenly, as he listened, he felt an emotion which not even sight of the pale girl cowering before Zalma had roused.

There 'was something about that pitiful sobbing in the girl's cabin which was childlike and touching. He rapped softly on the window. The crying stopped in a stifled coughing fit. Silence followed. Again King rapped—more urgently. He heard the faintest

sound of footsteps coming to the window. A thought came to him. He fished in a pocket; got out the picture in its heavy gold frame. He waited.

"Go away!" a low voice said shakily, but with attempt at an imperative tone. "Go away, or I'll tell Wolf Whitlow."

"I got somethin' to give you, Molly," King whispered. "Somethin' that belongs to you. An' you needn't be worryin' about me. I'm not one o' the gang that's been worryin' you. I"—he hesitated artfully—"maybe I daren't tell you who I am. Because if the gang here found out—"

"Well, what have you of mine? Put it on the window sill if you want to return it to me. Then go away. I can get it."

"A' right. I'm puttin' it here. You see what it is, then think things over. If you decide you'll talk to me about—about what happened before you come to Rustlers' Valley, I'll come back to the window an' ask you some questions. I can help you."

He laid the picture on the log-sill and stepped backward. He heard the casement creak softly open. Heard the slight gasp Molly made when she had identified the thing. He waited, and wondered if her curiosity—all he had to work on, thus far—would be keen enough to keep that window open. He hoped so! And presently, after what seemed ages, she called softly.

"Hoped you'd take a chance on me," he said quietly, coming up to the window. "I'm King Malloy; an' the's things in the valley these days that I don't *sabe*. You see, I have been out a couple years. I was homesteadin' until—not long ago."

"You—I've heard of you," she breathed, and shrank back, away from the window. "You—you're the killer, King Malloy!"

"Yeh? I never knew that. I have killed some men—but only men who needed killin' an' who pushed me, at that. Nobody calls me 'killer' to my

face. I'm on the dodge because o' just such a killin', over at Talus. A crooked, slimy gambler. But what I want to ask you is, who are you? How'd you get here?"

"I'm Molly Bland—niece of Ted Bland. Somebody—Wolf Whitlow won't tell me who—murdered my uncle, and Wolf Whitlow said I wasn't safe except here, where he could protect me. He said that the murderers of my uncle were bent upon wiping out the whole Bland family. He says he can't keep them from murdering me unless I'm right under his eye. But it's awful here!"

"Ted Bland was a right good friend o' mine," King said slowly. "He has done me quite a few favors. An' so somebody killed Ted; somebody Wolf knows, but can't control. Yes, sir—that's right curious, Wolf bein' the hairpin he is! Tell me about it. Maybe I can see a coon peekin' from a woodpile!"

"I LIVED over in north Texas with an aunt," she began, "until she died. Then I came to keep house for Uncle Ted at his ranch beyond Crosstrees—north of Tonto. He had peculiar visitors, I thought—very hard-looking men. He seemed always to have enough money to do us, though it seemed impossible he made anything much from his little ranch. I remarked on this to him, and he said he still had some he'd saved years ago. The only nice-looking man who came was Tolburr, who was a clerk in the express company's office in town. About three months ago he began coming out to see Uncle Ted. But Uncle Ted said Mr. Tolburr came to see me. He stopped coming after three or four visits, anyway. But he heard me comment about Uncle Ted's money, and he laughed. Uncle Ted didn't like it."

"No wonder," King drawled. "Ted Bland— Well, no matter. Tolburr never did anything but come out, after dark?"

"That was all. He'd ride up to the little corral and whistle, and if nobody else was in the house Uncle Ted would go out and bring Mr. Tolburr up. They used to sit up late and talk. Then, about two months ago, I went into town one day to visit a girl, and there was a very rough-looking bunch at the house when I left. They had a talk with Uncle Ted about some business matter, and there was quite a bitter argument. I couldn't hear details. Uncle Ted seemed rather—well, I thought he was frightened a little. No wonder! The big dark man with a hooked nose—Alec, his name was—would have frightened any one. When I came back out, the gang was still there, but Wolf Whitlow—I'd seen him a couple of times before—and two men from here were there also. Jake and the big, silly-faced man they call Jodey. Uncle Ted seemed more nervous than ever. They were wrangling like cats and dogs when I came up to the house. Uncle Ted seemed relieved to see me back. But Alec didn't want me around. Wolf Whitlow, too, told Uncle Ted I'd better go. So—"

She began to cry softly, and King Malloy, knowing Wolf Whitlow and Black Alec, and the kind of Long Riders who would ride with Alec, shook his head grimly. He could see that tense and squabbling group in Ted Bland's log ranch house. Two months ago. They had undoubtedly just turned the Tonto job and were arguing about a division with Ted Bland, who probably had given them the information to work on, as he had done in many other cases.

Accumulated ill-will toward Ted Bland, on the part of Alec and Wolf, had come to a point that day. Wolf, King knew, had always called Ted a money-grabber, wanting more of the spoils than those who risked their necks or liberty getting it. But for several years the pseudo-rancher had managed to get pretty much what he had demanded. He was not only val-

uable; he was dangerous because of what he knew.

They had wanted the girl out of the house because it had been decided to do away with Ted Bland then and there. Bland—no gunman; clever, not bold—had perhaps seen the danger in which he sat. He had wanted Molly there, hoping desperately that her presence would serve as brake to their trigger fingers.

"When you come back—Ted Bland was dead," he nodded softly. "Wolf an' Black Alec had done for him."

"Not Wolf! He has been—rather good to me. He told me how it happened. An argument between Uncle Ted and some of the men there. Uncle Ted, he said, tried to kill one of them and was himself killed by some who were his enemies. And these killers intended to wipe out the whole Bland family. He said I was being hunted for, then; that my only safety lay in going with him. I tried to get away and my horse fell and my arm was broken. He caught me."

"ZALMA'S pretty rough on you," he said slowly. "You want to get out o' this, now don't you? Got any folks who could be counted on to take you in? Girl, this is no place for you or for anybody like you! Zalma—well, she's an ol' stager. She can certainly take care o' herself. She's crazy about Wolf—an' she thinks he's gettin' pretty soft on you."

"He? On me? Why—" But then she stopped short, with a gasp. King, peering shrewdly at her, wondered if she were not suddenly remembering small things, unnoted at the moment of their happening, which now took on a different color.

"I—oh, I was a fool to come with him—alive! I—I can see it now. He has been hinting that Zalma wouldn't be here very long. And hinting at—other things. I didn't think. Didn't guess what he meant. I accepted what he had said about men hunting me as

his only reason for taking me away from Uncle Ted's."

"Listen!" he drawled, contemptuously. "I have known Wolf for ten year. He is the big noise among Long Riders in all this great scope o' country. Nothin' goes on that he doesn't know about. There's not a fella—except me, maybe—he doesn't run. He put Black Alec up to killin' Ted Bland—not that Alec would need a hard push. All this talk about mysterious murderers on yo' trail is a pack o' lies! An' his havin' to bring you to the hideout o' the Long Riders, too! You got to get!"

"But I saw you with Zalma!" she accused him suddenly. "You were all but making love to her. You went out with her. They say you're a noted Long Rider; a killer! Why should I believe that you're a bit better, or more trustworthy, than Wolf? If he's as bad as you make him out to be. I don't think I can ever trust anybody again! Not King Malloy, anyway!"

"I never was much at lady-wrangling," King remarked humorously. "So I do no' why you should do anything! I know what I am. Most men know it. But how to turn myself inside out an' show a woman—even if I wanted to do such—is more'n I see. I reckon you'll just have to take me at what I say I am—or leave me plumb alone. But I'll tell you this much: if you don't get out o' this one way or another, an' that mighty quick, Wolf Whitlow or one o' the others 'll grab you so quick it 'll make yo' head swim—an' you won't get loose, either! Now—want me to go?"

"Oh, what can I do but trust you? At least, you haven't snatched at me through the window—as most of the others would have done. What can I do? How can I get away?"

"Do no', yet. But I'll try to rig a scheme. I'll let you know what I figure up. It 'll have to be done quick, for—*Shut that window—quick!* Somebody's comin'!"

He moved silently along the cabin wall and squatted at the corner. And down the other wall, straight toward him, came a tall figure, barely visible in the moonless dark. King's pulse-beat leaped, then sagged back to normal. Wolf Whitlow!

"Who's it?" snarled Wolf and, though he could not see, King knew very well that Wolf was pointing a pistol at him. But his own arms were folded, and over the left forearm peeped the muzzle of a .44. He wondered what to do, then stood up.

"Why, Mr.—Whitlow!" he said, in the stilted manner of a gentleman somewhat gone in drink. "You're out right late. Never figured to see you comin' along like this. Goin' some'r's? If so, don't le' me stop you. I'm a patient man, Mr. Whitlow. An' I got nothin' at all to do but wait. An' I don't crave company—even if yo' lovely lady friend did hightail off an' leave me to drink on my lone."

"What're you doin' here?" Wolf demanded, harshly.

"Waitin'!" King said happily. "Jus' waitin', like I said. Don't le' me keep you from whatever important business you was headed to tend to. I got plenty time. She's got to come out some time, an' if I have to hunker right here till daybreak I'll meet up with her then. She's a nice-lookin' kid, Wolf."

LISTEN, Malloy," Wolf grated, "you stay away from this cabin! You hear? I don't know what you're up to, but stay away from this! That kid's not for any o' you."

"Yeh? S'pose you figure she's just for Mr. Wolf Whitlow? Well, you mustn't act piggish, Wolf. First off, I kind o' liked Zalma's looks an' I thought I'd give you a run for yo' money. But she don't want to buy in on any part o' me. I think she's half stuck on that lousy Black Alec, way she talked. Anyhow, I feel like gettin' acquainted with this kid."

"I told you—flat—to stay away

from here. If you figure you can beat my time with Zalma, heave your twine! But this kid is not for you! Now, you better listen to me, King!"

"Sh!" said King, and Wolf waited, instinctively. "Ah-ha!" King announced oracularly. "Got an idee! Maybe I'll marry her! Well, what you gawpin' about? You act like I was drunk. That's it, I bet you! You think I'm drunk, Wolf. Well, I'm just as sober as you are! Fat chance I had o' wrestlin' that bottle away from Zalma! Speakin' o' hollow laigs! I do figure she still loves you, Wolf, way she kept emptyin' that bottle to yo' profit an' my cost!"

He thought that he would cheerfully have emptied out his last gold piece to know what was going on in that keen brain there in the dark so close to him. Wolf Whitlow was a hard one to fool! And now he was oddly silent for an age-long minute. Then he laughed dryly.

"No use arguin' with you, King. Come on an' le's talk a piece o' business. You can see the kid to-morrow an' we'll talk about her then. But if you're sober, I want to talk to you."

"Zalma says you brought her in. A'right. What 'il you take for all that work you done? I got some money an' if some o' the boys drift in with *dinero*, I'll have some more. I can still deal some powerful blackjack an' I reckon I ain't so rusty at draw."

"Ne' mind the kid, I tell you! I'm not sellin' out!"

"A'right, then, I'll play you for her. Anything you pick. Five hund'd against her."

"Ne' mind her, I tell you. Come on up to Whisky Cabin. I'm about to put a hen on an' if you've got over yo' fool idees about goin' straight, the's plenty in this for you."

He slipped an arm through King's and drew him toward the dark bulk of Whisky Cabin, unlit in the rear. King went along, grumbling. Wolf hummed tunelessly to himself. Then:

"You had me bothered, King! Damn' if you didn't! We all know the' ain't a better man than you loose when you're ridin' with us. But you're just one man. An' if you come up—like I thought at first you had come—ready to open up on Alec an' Salt River Tom because o' that Frank Wilson business, your room 'd be a damn sight better'n your company, I'm free to tell you. Alec's mighty nigh as good as you, an' better some ways. No fool squeamin' around with Alec. If a man jumps up in his way, he downs that man! But you—well, you know what I mean. Alec an' me get along well enough. I furnish the headwork an' he handles the business.

"Naturally, I ain't aimin' to have you come along an' bust things open! But you said you had got over hankerin' for his scalp, an' I reckon we can all work together. But on this business I'm thinkin' about now, Alec won't figure. Like I told you, he's over there above Gunter. Been the' a right smart while, too. The's goin' to be some cattle—consid'able cattle—to handle, inside a couple weeks. But right now I'm aimin' at old Elbows Wyckoff, over at Loba Mesa."

"No damn good for an idee!" King grunted. "He'll beat off any bunch we could put up against him, Elbows would. That o' store o' his is a fort! An' he's got enough men, what with his clerks an' the boys from his corals, to murder us."

"Usual!" Wolf nodded. He stepped inside the door of Whisky Cabin and scratched a match. "But not this time, King!"

CHAPTER VI.

AT COMANCHE HEAD ROCK.

THERE was no sign of Zalma in that back room. From the front the loud voices of men came muffled from the bar. King squatted with back to wall. He had long since re-

holstered his pistol noiselessly. He stared heavy-lidded at Wolf.

"One o' Elbows's clerks has throwed in with us. He's got the combination to the big safe. Ought to be plenty in it, too, the day we'll smack down. Elbows acts as banker for half the outfits in that country. It'll be plumb simple, King. We'll be the' by dark, night I've picked. This fella, he'll unbar the door. We'll raise one hell of a commotion off to one side that'll draw the men away from the corrals. Then we'll ride around, go in that open door, unlock the safe an' be gone. Our man the', he'll steer 'em off in a wrong direction."

"Sounds good enough thataway," King admitted. "You say Alec won't figure in this job at all?"

"Don't need him. You an' Curly Al's bunch, an' Ike Seegrew's—hell! We won't even have to use this 'Tough Bunch.' I reckon we better let 'em trail along, though, at that. Just to keep 'em happy. What you think o' that crowd, anyhow?"

He discussed the store robbery in minute detail and all the while King was trying to figure his own course of action. This detective work was getting more and more unpleasant. He wanted to land only Black Alec and the men of the Tonto robbery. It began to seem now that he would have to make a decision even more unpleasant than he had expected. He tried to think of some way out of it. Some way of avoiding an actual part.

"Who's goin' to boss the spread?" he demanded suddenly, with the belligerence quite natural to one rather more than half cocked. "You ain't ridin' with the boys?"

"No. I had kind o' figured that this'd be a Curly Al job. Al's new to this country, but he's old at the game. No slip-ups if he's runnin' the show. An' with Ike Seegrew—you know Ike, King, from the old days—the'd be nothin' but a clockwork play over at Loba Mesa."

"Who's been handlin' the details with this crooked clerk o' Elbows's?" King demanded, just to make talk.

"I got hold o' him one day at Chink Meadows's place in Ferol. Met him out from Loba Mesa several times after that. But one o' Curly Al's boys fixed up the last part with him. Now he's goin' to come out to Comanche Point on the High Trail to-morrow to say just what's what."

"An' if he puts the cross on us," King said grimly, "we are goin' to wish we was in hell with our backs broke! I would like a look at an' a talk with this gunie before I ventured my one an' only damn precious neck on his play."

"Well, I don't see how—" Then Wolf scowled thoughtfully down at his boots and whistled under breath. Suddenly he looked up and grinned at King. "I got it, fella! This boy o' Curly's was to meet the fella at the Point—right by that Comanche Head rock—to-morrow before sundown. If you won't kick this time about workin' with Curly an' Ike, you can go down in place o' Curly's boy. Fix up the whole show with this fella—his name's Elfield. Look him over an' put the fear into him. I'll tell Curly you're goin'."

"How'll I know him?" King frowned, turning this over.

"Skinny cotton-top about twenty-five. Palest blue eyes you ever saw on a human. But you say your howdies to him, then ask if you never run into him in Santone. He'll say no, he's workin' at Loba Mesa. Then you'll ask how's tricks the'. He'll say—mark this careful now, King—that 'things are fine—*now*.' Get that? He stops when he says 'fine.' Then he says, '*now*.' You wait in the brush until a couple hours before sundown, then go up an' stand by the Comanche Head rock."

"A'right. I'm goin' to turn in. But when I come back, Wolf, I'm goin' to play you for that kid. I'm tellin' you!"

"We'll argue about that after this Loba Mesa job. Maybe I'll tell you a little somethin' then that 'll change yo' mind."

KING went out and turned in, but not to go to sleep immediately.

Wolf Whitlow was the one man in all the Long Riders from whom he felt sure of an equal battle, any time it came to matching wits. And Wolf's sudden change of front did not fool King in the least. Wolf was that most deceptive brand of liar—the sort who mixed truth into his fictions until it was nearly impossible to separate the two.

King thought that Wolf's show of friendliness was merely a pretense to give him time for something else, like the pretense of the wrestler who screws up his face agonizedly and seems to collapse, only to throw his opponent off guard and so wriggle out of a paralyzing hold.

There seemed no doubt to King that his appearance in the valley had seriously worried Wolf. In just what fashion and degree none but Wolf would ever know. That was Wolf's way. But something was schemed—beyond this business of which Wolf had talked at Elbows's store; something in which one King Malloy would be troublesome. And, too, there was the girl.

"That poor kid!" King was saying to himself just before he fell asleep. "She's too pretty an' too nice to be the football o' such as Wolf Whitlow. An' the likes o' the rest o' us, too! She has got better luck than that comin'. *Por Dios!* I'll see that she has got it comin'. I'll say *Chigaroo!* to you, Mr. Whitlow—an' you better be hearin' me, too! Watch out!"

The men of Curly Al's and Ike Seegrew's and Two Fingers's bunches watched King thoughtfully as he saddled Satan after breakfast the next morning. At the long community table that Wolf ran in Whisky Cabin

they had gossiped of this and that—and answered him quite courteously when he made an occasional remark. But there was a narrow-lidded suspicion that, King told himself, one might have cut with a knife, it was so thick and palpable. Ike Seegrew and Jake he did not see at all.

As he turned Satan toward the High Trail that led out of the valley and over Cutrock Mesa, Zalma came around the corner of Whisky Cabin and looked at him. She returned his smile with a mocking wave of the hand. He passed Molly Bland's cabin on his way out. He slowed Satan and eyed the cabin. Then he whistled softly, and Molly appeared at a window. King grinned and saluted. A faint smile showed upon her pallid face.

"Watch your step while I'm gone," he called softly. "But no matter what happens, remember that I'll be back an' you can figure me a good big fist on your arm. *Hasta la vista!*"

A heavy-set man, immaculate in riders' clothing, met him at a turn of the trail, almost sat his horse down, and whooped:

"*Yaaaaiiiah!* King Malloy!" cried Pablo Chacon. "My friend! It is not decent—this way of yours with officers. You should think of their feelings. How would it please you if you were a sheriff to have prisoners forever refusing to remain under arrest? No, it is not decent! Johnny Clide is disgusted!"

He grinned expansively upon King, who returned the grin, but wondered. Should he enlist Pablo—or even try to?

"Where's Black Alec?" he demanded abruptly. "I want him."

"North of Gunter, says Wolf. So there he is—it may be."

"Will you help me some? Pablo, old-timer, I'm back with you-all for just one thing—I'm admittin' it to you an' lyin' like hell about it to ever'body else—an' that's to land Alec. It would cert'nly be great to have you helpin'—"

"I have turned my horse around," grinned Pablo as full answer. "Where *mi buen amigo* rides, there rides Pablo Chacon."

"No—not right now. I wish you'd drift on back to the valley an' keep your eyes peeled. I'll be back soon. Just remember what I'm after an' keep those good ears o' yours open."

"Well, I would rather ride with you, King. Something—I have the feeling—tells me that more fun will be with you. But—if you say so, I will go back to the valley and listen."

HE rode on, and King, grinning a little as he watched him go, went forward toward Comanche Point. Having Pablo Chacon as ally made him feel better. The Mexican was one in a thousand, of any color. He made the Point by two, much easier of mind, and sat down to wait for this dishonest, traitorous clerk of old Elbows. He smoked and considered his problem.

He could hardly refuse to ride on this robbery with the gang. That would rouse quick and dangerous suspicion. He could hardly give away the plan to any authorities, or to old Elbows. Spy as he was, unofficial "John Law," still there were limits to what he would do in that rôle. And giving up such as Ike Seegrew and little Jake, with whom he had ridden and at times fought; who had shared tobacco and food and water with him time and time again—huh-uh! He had only promised to bring in Black Alec—and then only if Alec had pulled the Tonto job.

Something after four thirty, it was, when he came silently up to Comanche Head, the grotesque boulder which on the inner, trail, face, reared perhaps nine feet high, but which on the outer face looked out over a precipitous slope. Mechanically, he glanced down at the trail floor. No fresh hoofprints. His man, then, had not slipped by him unobserved. He leaned against the Head and looked around him. And at

a slight sound above him—on the cup-like top of the Head—he looked instinctively upward, a brown hand sliding down to a pistol butt.

"Don't yuh, King!" counseled Bulldog Johnny Clide. "Like yuh told me in Frisco—I don't want to down yuh, but I will if yuh crowd me! An' yuh know that's gospel. Let down them belts o' yo's slo-o-ow! Step out o' them—just two steps. Then turn yo' back on me an' keep reachin' for the stars—the high ones!"

It would have been thirty-third degree suicide to try a break here, not three feet from that rock-steady .44 muzzle. And Johnny Clide had few superiors with a Winchester. Grim-faced, King pushed the crossed shell belts down his thighs until he could step out of them. Johnny Clide's carbine muzzle steadily followed him.

King turned around and held his hands in air. He heard the soft thud of Johnny's feet striking the trail. Then a familiar hard, round something poked him in the back. Johnny invited him to lower his hands. The cuffs clicked about one wrist, then about the other. He was handcuffed with hands behind him then. He turned slowly and grinned.

"Kind o' looks like yo' turn this evenin' Johnny!"

"Goin' to be my turn from now on, King," the little sheriff said grimly. "I'm kind o' fed up on yo' break-aways."

"Oh, don't say that, Johnny," King mocked him. "You know blame well you're a wonderin' right now when I'm goin' to curl my tail an' break down the timber. You know well enough you won't keep me. Can't! How come you was up the' on the Head?"

"Luck," shrugged Johnny Clide shortly. "Jist luck. Yo' hawse back in the brush? I see yuh come into the trail."

"Yeh. Want to wait here while I go get him? Won't take but a couple minutes."

"I got a couple minutes to spare. I'll go with yuh."

They found Satan, and Johnny led the yellow horse back to the trail, with King preceding him—by request. Then they got Johnny's chunky bay in the same manner. King lifted his brows.

"Now, whither away, Johnny, m' lad?" he inquired. "You know this country right well, don't you? But the's maybe a spot or two I could show you, Johnny. S'pose you le' me guide you around a spell. Nothin' like an education!"

"Yuh can go to hell!" Johnny grinned tightly when King had managed to mount Satan. "The's places around I have never see an' don't expect to. Trails I'm not aimin' to ride—alone or with a sudden hairpin like King Malloy. Nah-sir! Ferol-town is jist plenty good enough for a plain country fella like me. An', King, I do hope yuh don't make no sudden moves while yuh're goin' ahead o' me. This .44 is shorely a hair trigger."

AS they rode downhill through the end of afternoon and on through twilight and at last in darkness, with all of King's deft questions going either unanswered or receiving curt, evasive replies, King came at last to a decision. He had been jobbed by Wolf Whitlow.

There was no traitorous clerk at Elbows's store. There was no robbery planned there. Wolf had skillfully led him on with his talk until he had simply suggested himself that he should see this "Elfield."

Oh, but it had been done cleverly! Wolf had not said a word about him coming to this ambush. He had pushed King into virtually claiming the job.

"*Dios mio!* He certainly wanted to rid himself o' me!" King said wonderingly to himself. "I do'no' a thing about Curly Al an' I know too damn much about that Two Fingers. But if Ike Seegrew—or Jake—was to find out that Wolf had tolled me up to

Comanche Head an' arranged for me to find Johnny Clide waitin' for me, hell 'd certainly be poppin'—an' right on top o' Wolf! For they'd figure if he'd job me he'd job them; job anybody."

He wondered if it had been his snooping around Molly's cabin which had suddenly crystallized Wolf's determination. He shook a slow head. He liked the kid himself. But apparently Wolf was sore-smitten with her, to take these risks in order to keep her for himself. And he grinned happily. Get away he would. Somehow. Soon. And he would add Wolf Whitlow's name to the list which had contained the names of the Tonto robbers and killers.

So he gossiped, over-shoulder, with Johnny about that worthy's experience in San Francisco. And Johnny Clide, warmed by this position, which was reversal of that other, talked freely and without rancor of being found by the police after five or six uncomfortable hours in the lodging house. His freedom of speech on this topic after his reticence about to-day's business made King the surer that Johnny Clide had climbed up Comanche Head on information furnished by Wolf.

"Well, the's Ferol!" King observed cheerfully. "Wonder if they got a bed for us, Johnny? Last time I was in the' the damn ho-tel was all crowded up like you'd hardly believe."

"At the ho-tel we're goin' to," thus Johnny said very dryly, "they would make room for us, whatever!"

By a circuit of the rambling hill town, they made the little jail. There was a sleepy deputy in the sheriff's office. He looked with something like awe at the famous King Malloy—and with more awe at King's captor. On behalf of Apache County he made Piñon County's sheriff welcome. Johnny went through King's clothing carefully before uncuffing him. Money and pocket knife and a pair of very pretty and even more efficient .41 der-

ringers, he put to one side. King laughed suddenly. It had occurred to him that Johnny's face—had he been foolish enough to be carrying his parole—would have been a picture.

"Oh, nothin' much," he chuckled in answer to Johnny's suspicious question. "Let this bright young dep'ty o' yo' fella sher'f take a gold piece, Johnny, an' tote us in some supper."

CHAPTER VII.

A HOT SCENT.

THE jail in Ferol, county seat of Apache County, was well built, if small. It was built of quarried stone and the cell tier was walled off by heavy steel bars from the passageway before it. Johnny Clide was a cautious and forethoughtful man. Not only did he lock King—the only prisoner in the jail—inside the jail-inclosure proper. He selected the end cell for him and there it was that King ate, with Johnny watching outside to see that no cutlery disappeared.

After Johnny had gone back to the sheriff's office—the other room of the one-story building—King sat smoking thoughtfully. A glance around had told him that the only feasible route out of Apache County's official hostelry was by the door. He pressed his face against that door and looked out into the passage. Presently he saw a broom leaning against the wall. He stared at it for a long time; then a slow grin lifted the corners of his thin mouth. He looked behind him, at the cell. It was littered with cigarette stubs and empty muslin tobacco sacks.

He yelled for some minutes before Johnny, at the passage end, inquired the trouble. King demanded the broom that he might sweep out his cell. He said that it was not fit for pigs. He said that if he couldn't clean the place, nobody would get any sleep in that end of Apache County the night.

Johnny sent the young deputy to

stick the broom inside the cell. King took it and raised such a dust that the deputy retreated. Thereafter, King scuffed the litter with his feet and worked busily at the wire lashing on the broom.

Johnny Clide himself came down the passage to see that the broom was out of King's cell. And King, leaning against the door, said in a low voice that he was one fool and Johnny Clide another. Johnny, turning in the passage, keeping a good yard away from the door, was moved to inquire how he was a fool.

"You want that gang o' Tonto robbers, hey, Johnny? They are kind o' beginning to rawhide you, not? But nothin' at all to what they're goin' to do, a lil bit later. Just you wait!"

"Well?" demanded Johnny, narrowed-eyed. "What about it?"

"If you'll promise to let me make one o' my famous breaks, maybe I can put you onto 'em."

Johnny sniffed contemptuously and turned to go up the passage. And King's hand came out through the bars. The noose he had made in the thin wire from the broom dropped neatly over Johnny's head; down about his neck. The sheriff was jerked to the door half strangled. He had made no sound, but a single gasp. King held him there and jerked the Colt from Johnny's holster; took the keys from Johnny's pants pocket. He let the nearly unconscious sheriff sag to the floor and jammed the key into the lock. One turn and a push, then he was outside. He picked up Johnny and shoved him into the cell; freed him of the choking wire; locked him in.

"Reckon the sher'f 'll be back by noon to-morrow," the deputy remarked as King's footsteps sounded behind him. The deputy stood in the office door. He did not turn.

"Give him my love," drawled King. "Meanwhile, son, grab a star—an' grab her sudden! Come backin' toward me—quiet!"

Automatically the young man's hands shot upward. He came backing most obediently until he ran into a Colt muzzle. King took his pistol and shepherded him back into the jail and to a cell adjoining Johnny Clide's. He locked him in and enjoined a strict silence for a half hour.

"An' if you're not sure about it's bein' the full half hour, son, you remember it's best to be wrong on the right side."

KING'S belongings were in the office cupboard. Satan was in the corral behind the jail. In less than three minutes the long-legged yellow horse was leaving Ferol—and heading toward Crosstrees. For King had been doing much thinking that afternoon. He had developed a burning desire to see one Tolburr, who had made mysterious calls on old Ted Bland.

Satan covered the fifteen miles to Crosstrees at a racing gait. The ugly yellow horse was capable of almost unlimited work in any given day. It was close to midnight when they came into the shabby little town. But there was a saloon open, and King tied Satan to the hitch-rack a little way from its front. He had intended making cautious inquiries, but luck was with him.

A man came a little unsteadily through the doorway and turned to make some indistinct remark to those in the barroom. But the phrase he added was perfectly clear to King—"or my name's not Billy Tolburr!" he said.

In the darkness by the hitch-rack King stepped into the fellow's path. He whispered two words: "Wolf Whitlow!"

"Who're you?" gasped Tolburr, recoiling.

"Ne' mind! Let's move down some place where I can talk to you. Ever'-thing all right here? Had anybody snoopin' around?"

"Clide's been here twice—the sheriff, you know. But I've seen nobody else. What does Wolf want now? They still have Art Thomas in jail at Talus. Grand jury indicted him—plenty. Who're you? How do I know that—that you're all right?"

He was desperately nervous. He seemed to have got over the effect of his liquor. His voice shook. King's lips curled contemptuously. There was not enough nerve here for a real *buscadero*.

"I said ne' mind who I am! It's enough for you to know that I'm straight from the valley. As for bein' all right—you just have to take that for granted. You think that I would know all the ins an' outs o' the Tonto job if I wasn't all right? Know how you tipped Ted Bland to the money shipment comin' through an' all that? Sit down on the water trough here. We can see anybody comin' before they get inside hearin' distance."

"I—I reckon you're all right, then. But Ted Bland—and Wolf and Alec, too—promised nobody but them would know about me. It's not fair for them to be spreading it. If the company had an idea of what I'd done— Oh, Lord, I've wished a hundred times that I hadn't done it! I wake at night with a cold sweat, dreaming that Clide has me by the shoulders. I wouldn't go into another job for ten times the thousand!"

"Oh, yeh, I reckon you would—an' will. The's no safer place for lightnin' to strike than where it just struck—because o' that ol' sayin'. So you look around an' see what's goin' to come through that's worth tryin' for. Oh! Bill Tredegar was a friend o' yo's, wasn't he?"

"Why, yes—in a way! And that's another thing, too, that's on my mind night and day! But I didn't have any idea they'd kill him. I wasn't responsible for that. It was his own foolishness. He shouldn't have tried fighting when he saw the odds against him."

"Oh, sure," King said calmly. "Well? You with us or against us, fella? I just want to know what to tell Wolf."

Tolburr protested more and more feebly, then promised to watch for another large money shipment going through. And he stiffened enough to say that he must have a larger cut on any future haul. King promised him solemnly that he would get everything that was due him.

"An' that"—King was squatting outside that general merchandise store which was also the post office—"is no joke! With Judge Randall on the bench an' this slinkin' scoun'el up before him—Yeh, he'll collect just plenty!"

He was scrawling a note to the judge:

Tolburr at Crosstrees is your meat. But rope him real quick. He will squeal like a rat. He tipped the gang to that monie shipment. Watt he will confes will cleer Art Thomas.

HE had brought two envelopes from his saddle pockets. One he addressed to the judge. He inclosed it in the other, addressed to a storekeeper in Talus. For it had occurred to the cautious King that a letter found under the door in the morning with money on it for a stamp, would receive a scrutiny more than ordinarily inquisitive. If the postmaster-storekeeper happened to think it odd that such a mysterious letter were addressed to that well-known gentleman, Judge Efram Randall, whose nephew lay in Talus jail, and should talk about it—

"But this way," King thought placidly, "ol' Anson Jones Leffler 'll open her up an' see the envelope pointin' at the judge. He'll deliver her without unbuttonin' that tight an' honest Dutch mouth o' his. Good enough!"

He went unobtrusively out to Satan and swung up:

"Andarle! Andarle! Get goin', you

long-legged cross between original sin an' dynamite!" he grunted affectionately to the yellow horse. "We're high-tailin' back to the valley. We waited an' we waited plumb patient, but that Elfield fella, he just never showed up a-tall. Funny—an' sad, too! We're grievin'!"

His shoulders heaved, but not with grief, as Satan bore him out of town. But he forgot the joke presently. There was too much to consider, as the yellow horse went steadily back up the trail he and Johnny Clide had followed from Comanche Point. When dawn came he looked soberly at the blazing wonder of the sky above the eastern hills.

"Mighty lovely!" he said aloud. "Mighty—lovely! I wouldn't give a hoot for a man that didn't like Texas. Still, I'm maybe feelin' that way more than usual, because I may not get to see a sun-up like that again, or any other kind. Can happen. C'm'on, Diablo! What you loafin' for? Why, you ain't waitin' for that Elfield still, I hope! Well, you simple-minded billy-goat! He ain't comin'!"

There was more than one trail out of guarded Rustlers' Valley. King knew them all—and how they lay in relation to the High Trail which, mounting mesa or ridge very frequently, overlooked the run of some of these tracks of the Long Riders. So when upon a scrub-studded comb of the hills he looked down and saw black dots crossing a long meadow, he wondered instinctively who was using the Little Trail. It was a dim one.

"Nine lil dots. Count 'em, hawse: nine. Now, which o' the valley citizens could they be? Huh? Yeh, that's absolutely right—could be just any nine on that trail."

Nearing the point where the High Trail dipped into the valley, King rode most alertly. There were three set places along here, where men could overlook the trail and send a hail of lead into any one riding it, while

themselves remaining virtually unseen, completely sheltered. No regular watch was kept at any of the natural sentry boxes, which made approach more interesting—to one remembering nine fast-riding men.

But he had passed two, and was all but on the valley edge, when a sharp hail came from the third lookout. King's head jerked that way, and a hand went to carbine-stock, then Pablo Chacon greeted him cheerfully in Spanish. But Pablo was sober-faced enough when he scrambled down.

"I SAID that I should ride with you!" Pablo grunted. "But be glad, *mi viejo*, my old one! That trickery played upon you has caused very much trouble in the valley—to Wolf Whitlow! Jodey the simple and strong, he grew drunk yesterday, after I rode in. He must talk. Well! He chose to tell in Whisky Cabin of Wolf's very great cleverness in sending you into the arms of Bulldog Johnny at Comanche Head. Oh, *amigo mio*, but there was hell! Curly Al and Ike Seegrew left the valley. They would have no more of Wolf. They said that one who would serve such as you in that manner could not be trusted by any decent Long Rider. Jake, I think, had perhaps suspected that Wolf had planned; if not that thing, something of the kind. For he was most violent in saying to Wolf what all of us thought. Jake rode out with Ike Seegrew."

"Where to?" King demanded curiously.

"To Arizona—they said. But they need money and must look about for something to do. So—they will zigzag a good deal. Black Alec and his cutthroats, they rode in then. No decent Rider would work with Alec! They joined this Tough Bunch you had shepherded in. The nine of them left for Loba Mesa."

"Why—why, I thought that Loba Mesa job was all in Wolf's lyn' head,

after I found that he'd pushed me over to Johnny."

"No; they have gone to rob Elbows Wyckoff's store. I think it a fools' idea. They have had a man up there for a week as spy—and if Elbows has not already looked into that man's mind, then he is not the Elbows we know, King. That old man was a scout too long! He is the devil! My thought is that they will take metal from Elbows—but lead, not gold! They asked me to go with them—"

"Yeh? An' what said my friend, the bold Pablo Chacon?"

"I? Nothing—much. Merely that I, who had ridden with those wolves, Jim Battle and King Malloy, could not now run with sneaking coyotes. I said—truthfully—that I would wait and see King Malloy come back with Bulldog Johnny's watch and pistols and store-teeth."

He grinned affectionately at King: "Well, my old one? What now? If Elbows kills Black Alec for you, that saves us time, *no es verdad?* If Alec gets away from Loba Mesa and comes back, you will kill him there. Then—King, they have hunted you out of the dog-kennels, for you are a wolf! *Bueno!* You and I will ride the wolves' trail together!"

King shook his head slowly and, to tell truth, a bit reluctantly, for there was infection in Pablo's devil-may-care tone.

"No more for me. Pablo, I'm on parole right now. An' if I prove that Black Alec pulled the Tonto job—an' I've proved that much already—an' deliver him to Johnny Clide, I get my pardon. Wait a minute now! I'm a detective—an' I'm not. It's like this: You know I told Black Alec it was shoot on sight! You know he never let it come to *sight*—an' how I hunted him. Well, I turned down offers o' parole an' pardon, until I knew 'twas Black Alec I'd have to hunt. That he'd come back to the Rustlers' Valley country. Now I'm goin' to get him!"

"Kill him, surely!" nodded Pablo calmly. "No man of decency would do otherwise. But kill him; not capture and surrender him to a sheriff. I know my friend, King Malloy, too well to believe otherwise. He would not be my friend, else."

"You're right—so far's you see my trail," King said softly. "I'm no John Law! I have gone up an' down with our kind too much to turn bloodhound on 'em. I'm after Black Alec an' nobody else. I don't have to take orders from anybody. I'm goin' to find Black Alec an' give him the even bust he never gave poor Frank Wilson. Then I'm goin' to kill him like the sneakin', murderin' snake he is. An' then— Pablo, by now Johnny Clide an' Piñon County officers ought to know that 'twas Black Alec pulled the Tonto job. '*Sta bueno!* Knowin' that, when they find out that I downed him, they'll have to admit I filled my end o' the contract—even if I filled it accordin' to my own ideas an' never bothered about other Long Riders that Johnny Clide would 've corraled. *No es verdad?*"

"*Sí, es verdad!* True!" cried Pablo, grinning. "King, my friend, when once more you ride the honest trail—take you to the law, *amigo!* As a damn nester, you waste your talents! And now, my friend, I ride this trail with you. Our last together, it may be."

CHAPTER VIII.

BLACK ALEC'S GANG.

KING had intended going down into the valley. There was a feeling in his bones that down there a slender, black-haired girl was looking anxiously for one King Malloy; that Molly Bland had need of him. He hesitated, and Pablo watched him curiously, quite misinterpreting King's thoughts.

But King was still more of a man on an enemy's trail than a man in love.

He would have bitterly denied any part of this last accusation, at this moment. To himself he would have admitted that the dark, winsome eyes of the girl had haunted him since first sight of her. But it was only pity he felt for her. Certainly! And she—well, was he not merely King Malloy the Killer to her?

Pablo said that Molly had been going and coming between her cabin and the kitchen of Whisky Cabin. He had seen nothing to make a man think she was in any danger. He seemed surprised at King's concern. So King made his decision and sent Pablo for his horse—forethoughtfully staked out within a hundred yards of the lookout. Then he looked at Pablo grimly:

"Ready? It's Loba Mesa—an' we can hardly hit the' before the bunch has tried their hand at Elbows's store."

"My friend," grinned Pablo, "I would leave food for whisky; and I would in turn leave whisky for a woman; but I would also leave the most beautiful woman in the world for a fight. And leave without my hat! *Adelante!* Let us go!"

They rode over to cut into the Little Trail, over which Black Alec and his eight followers had ridden toward Loba Mesa and grim old Elbows Wyckoff's store and freight-corrals. At dusk they stopped five minutes, while Pablo got from his saddlebag the lunch he had thoughtfully rammed into it. He divided it, and they rode on, eating fried beef and cold Dutch oven biscuit as they went. Each knew this trail. It was a gamble if Black Alec, having stuck up Elbows's store, would use it for his return trip. There were other trails he could take.

The moon came out, making blacker the walling trees on the trail's side. King hardly knew whether he welcomed the yellow light or not. It made them gorgeous targets.

Midnight—and still they had not reached the mesa. The robbery, or the

attempt at it, should be about over by now. King wondered if they had used the plan which Wolf, feeling secure in knowledge of King's future, as he thought, had described—one part of the Long Riders raising a commotion off to one side of the store, the others dashing in. And was a traitorous employee to open a door for them?

They came up to where the rimrock of the mesa showed overhead. And now they heard shots. Pablo rode up alongside of King. He was patting the smooth walnut stock of his Winchester seemingly without knowing it. He leaned forward like a bulldog on a leash. The firing swelled and diminished; swelled and diminished again.

"*Dios!*" cried Pablo impatiently. "What happens, up there on the mesa? After so much shooting, some one should be on the run, *no es verdad?*" Alec could not hope to fight all the men Elbows could throw against him—if Elbows were warned. If he has not succeeded in his job—if he had not succeeded before all that shooting—he has been driven back, King, *mi viejo*. But nobody comes this way!"

"If Alec was outguessed, an' ol' Elbows was lookin' for this business, why, Alec was maybe cut off from this trail. I move we go around the Rim an' have a look along the main Tonto trail off the mesa. We have got to be careful to-night, Pablo. No shootin' at Elbows's gang. I want Black Alec!"

They turned, and by narrow, rugged cross trails, circled the mesa's rim. It was hard and rather slow going. An hour passed; another. King chafed at the delay. If Alec got clear off, it meant another chase. If, on the other hand, he should be killed by Elbows's men, King thought that his chances of a pardon would be slim.

THEY gained the Tonto trail at last and found it empty. Pablo got down and scratched a match in the shelter of a cupped hand. He moved up the trail on his knees,

scratching match after match. And finally he stood erect and shrugged.

"Plenty of tracks," he grunted. "Made within the hour, I will gamble. Twelve to fifteen horses, *amigo mio*. All is so quiet up above now that I think Alec's bunch—what is left of them—have been chased down the trail. Shall we follow?"

"I don't fancy bein' up on the mesa with ol' Elbows's outfit moppin' up the scraps," King said grimly. "Yes, reckon our best bet is trailin' along to see what's what an' who's who."

They rode at a trot along the trail to Tonto, which lay better than forty miles away. And after awhile Pablo vowed he heard shots. King was not sure, but they went on more cautiously, with carbines across their arms. No further sounds came to guide or warn them before the dawn broke.

From the top of a hill King searched the timber with his glasses, while Pablo studied the trail floor. He was a better trailer than King; better than almost any but an Indian. He found the same medley of hoofprints as had shown by the Rim. But King grunted suddenly. He had found a body of ten or twelve men, coming like questing hounds, back along the trail.

He and Pablo slid from the trail like foxes and put the horses into the timber. For he had recognized old Elbows Wyckoff's hunched, wide figure in the van of those grim riders. The pair rode around Elbows's men and presently came to a place in the trail which explained the pursuers' turning back. For no fresh sign was in the trail. King stared about him grimly.

"Bet you I know what Alec an' the others have done!" he said abruptly. "They cut over the rocks back the' a piece an' headed for the trails along the Divide. An' if the trails in these parts haven't changed in two years, I know one that 'll cut off a couple hours from any they'd take. One that runs into the valley trail that Alec an' his bunch must have rode."

"Do you think that Elbows is giving up?" Pablo inquired, in a tone that answered the question. King merely grinned.

"We had better be mighty careful. His outfit 'll be combin' these hills like Black Alec was gold-plated. An' that bunch, Pablo, ol'-timer, they would perforate our noble hides just as cheerful an' complete as ever they'd drill wicked gunies like Black Alec an' the Tough Bunch! Put that in a letter home."

He led Pablo through underbrush for a mile, covering the trackless brush by sense of direction only. And then they hit a trail and turned into it. King smacked rein ends down on Satan's neck and the yellow horse shot forward at a lope.

mile after mile they rode on this thirty-inch path, with the ends of branches banging their booted legs, their arms, very often their faces. And at last they came into another and harder-beaten trail on the Divide. With no fresh tracks on its floor. Pablo made a savage sort of sound, deep in his throat. One might have thought that he, not King, rode the vengeance trail to-day. They looked at each other, then stiffened.

"Comin' fast!" King said curtly. "If it should be that damn triflin' Tough Bunch—"

There was nothing to do but ride out into the trail before the fugitives. For King could not bring himself to ambush them. He had a flashing glimpse of Black Alec's big figure in the lead; then a swarthy fellow who looked like a breed; and last, Muskogee Jack of Two Fingers's Tough Bunch. This medley proved the thoroughness of Elbows's counterstroke at them, King thought.

THEN he was out in front of them and Black Alec sat his tall red horse down on its tail. For an instant he glared with red-tinged black eyes, then with a wild yell to those with

him, he roweled the red horse into a jump aside into the brush. Muskogee Jack was as quick, at least. But the dark breed, who had ridden behind Black Alec, was overwarlike. With sudden snarling flash of teeth, he whipped out a gun and blazed away. It seemed to King that he could hear bullets whining within an inch of his ear. He was dimly conscious that Pablo's horse was going sidewise and down. That Pablo, leaping clear, was running toward the breed and firing as he went. He saw the breed drop.

A bullet came singing out of the brush that held Black Alec and the grim, silent Muskogee Jack. King rammed the hooks into Satan and the yellow horse moved in a jack-rabbit jump straight into the brush.

King flung himself from the saddle and whipped the carbine from its scabbard. Flat on the ground, he listened tensely. From somewhere on his right, Pablo was making Colt thunder. There was a reply from one of the hidden men. The *rap-rap-rap* of bullets through the leaves was undertone for the roaring of the rifle and pistol.

King began inching toward the man firing at Pablo. He was afraid, in this grimly tense moment, of but one thing—that Black Alec's well-known discretion would overpower him; that Alec would leave Muskogee Jack to fight the war and would himself slip away, as, evidently, he had done up at Loba Mesa.

King went warily, with head moving to right and left. Any bush might mask one of the men—the one who was not blazing away at Pablo—blessed Pablo, who was thus drawing fire. Cautious as King was, he heard nothing at all, saw nothing, until a tiny rustler behind him sent him, straightening swiftly, in a jaguar-leap to one side. As he whirled to face the sound, a Colt roared and a bullet came too close for any comfort.

It was Muskogee Jack and, after his shot, he had dropped to his knees and

was going at the oddest gait King had ever seen—running backward at the squat and just flipping back a hammer for another shot. His dark face was twisted into a venomous mask, made the more sinister by the bloody track of a bullet which had kissed across his forehead—at Loba Mesa, probably. King pumped .44's at him from the hip as fast as he could work the carbine lever. Something rapped the crown of King's hat. Then Muskogee Jack's squatting body seemed of a sudden all limbered joints. He fell as if boneless; collapsing rather than dropping.

A BULLET came singing across the little clearing in which they were, to thud into a tree trunk. Another followed almost at once and whanged into a sapling a couple of feet from King's elbow. He took the hint and copied Muskogee Jack's odd gait to get back into the brush. He crouched there, glaring toward the place from which Alec's bullets had come.

King had always owned a supreme confidence in his own ability with either Colt or long gun. He had always believed that when he faced Black Alec the meeting would end with Alec's death, not his. But that did not mean that he discounted the big, black man's ability with his weapons. From Montana to the Rio Grande, the Long Riders knew Black Alec as a gunman and a killer.

He was a cautious soul; he liked the breaks; he would shoot at no man from the front if it were possible to kill him from behind. And he had a homicidal mania. He liked to kill. He was as dangerous here and now as an unseen rattler. King set himself for a duel. Characteristically, he forgot Pablo, who might be expected to help very efficiently.

He began to circle through the brush, going soundlessly, for all his rider's boots. He heard nothing, and when he came to the place where two ejected

shells lay, there was nobody there. He began to move again, hunting for Black Alec, who doubtlessly was somewhere beyond him, going on the same errand.

Then he straightened, standing behind a bush. He edged around it—and there was Black Alec, carbine in big, hairy paws, just turning to face him. He made a harsh, strangling sound at discovery of King. Up jumped the carbine like a thing with murderous soul all its own, eager to kill.

King jerked up his own .44 and the hammer clicked on empty chamber. He let it go, saving time by merely releasing it. Down to his Colt butt his hand dropped as in an exhibition of the quick draw.

A bullet from Alec's carbine seared his left jawbone from chin to jaw angle as pistol muzzle cleared holster top. Then he was firing the triggerless weapon with twinkling hammer thumb. Black Alec fired three shots after King got into action. But they went a little wide under the shocks of the heavy bullets that struck him. King went over and looked at him. Five holes in his breast that might have been covered with two palms.

"Hey, Pablo!" he yelled. "It's all over!"

CHAPTER IX.

RAIDING THE WOLF'S DEN.

"MY friend," said Pablo Chacon, looking thoughtfully down at the three bodies so conspicuously in the trail, and at the inscription on the envelope which was pinned to Black Alec's shirt, "you should not forget the good advice I gave you yesterday: Turn to the law, *mi viejo*, when you go back!"

"That does kind o' roll up this ball o' twine," King nodded. "You left a plain trail for Elbows's bunch to follow up here? *Bueno!* They ought to be usin' around then inside a half hour. They'll find that notice, an' I reckon

Elbows 'll be glad to tell Johnny Clide he has got the robbers o' Tonto, since at the same time he's got the fellas that raided him."

He looked thoughtfully at the breed, who had been the first of these three to drop. From this one, before the fellow died, Pablo had learned the story of Black Alec's luckless venture.

They had been expected; they had run into a withering fire at the corals. Creek and the boy Whitey who, with Two Fingers and Muskogee, had started shooting down the trail to draw Elbows's men away from the store, had been killed instantly. But Two Fingers and Muskogee had got away and found themselves riding with Black Alec and this Kiowa breed. But a bullet had knocked Two Fingers from the saddle before they left the mesa.

"Yes, sir," nodded King, grimly. "The worst bunch that ever rode these parts is gone to the last man! Now, Pablo, I reckon we'll head for the valley. Nobody the' but Wolf an' Jodey. I'm just goin' to ride in an' tell Wolf I'm takin' that kid out o' the'. I—don't really expect Wolf 'll argue about it."

"*Por Dios!* I don't think Wolf will feel like objecting to anything for a long while. Not when we have told him of Black Alec's going. Well! And when you have taken the girl away you will not forget, King, my old one, to let me come and dance at the wedding."

"Weddin', hell!" King snapped, with face reddening. "What would I want to get married for? Even if she was willin'?"

"Why does any one want to get married? I don't know. I have never wanted to get married. But—I saw her face, *mi viejo*, when your name was spoke' in the Whisky Cabin yesterday. I say that I hold you as to a promise—to invite me."

They rode fast for awhile. For it was possible that Elbows's curiosity concerning the gentlemen who had so

considerately left these dead robbers in the trail might lead him to follow them. But after various doublings over rocky ground, they relaxed their gait. King found time to think. If nothing had gone amiss, he was the same as a pardoned man this moment.

"She's pretty as a lil red wagon; pretty as a painted picture in a saloon!" he told himself. "But—'you're King Malloy, the killer!' she said to me. Huh-uh! Huh-uh! A girl couldn't say a thing like that to a man an' then think anything much of him. Not enough to marry him anyhow. An' do I want to marry her? Want to marry anybody? I just be damned if I know."

Back to the valley they came; past the lookout where Pablo had waited for King. Everywhere was very quiet. Not that much noise ever disturbed Rustlers' Valley—except down around the Whisky Cabin. But it was a relief to King to come in sight of the straggling cabins and see smoke curling blue and lazily peaceful from a chimney or two. He sighed relievedly.

"Come on," he cried suddenly to Pablo. "We'll go tearin' down an' kind o' chuck Wolf off guard. We're comin' to tell o' the sad doin's over at Loba Mesa!"

So they raced down the valley, but the thudding drum of the horses' hoofs brought nobody to the door—nobody, that is, if one discounted old Maria Escontes, who had lived in the valley since it had been a hill, or so the *buscaderos* said. She looked out of her little stone cabin, and at sight of King, who was a favorite of hers, her chocolate-brown face seemed to freeze. But if she had intended saying anything they had gone past before she had made up her mind.

BEFORE Whisky Cabin they pulled the horses to a sliding stop and let the split reins drop. Across from the hitch-rack and inside they ran. Then they stopped. Old crippled Ed even was missing. At first they saw

nobody at all in the place. Then from the back room came the silly faced Jodey, a hulking six-footer, with the brawn of a giant and the brain of a boy.

"Where's Wolf?" King demanded. "Speak up, you!"

Jodey shrugged sullenly, with a head jerk that indicated everything behind him. King slid across to him and glared up into the cloudy yellow eyes. Then he gave over trying for information from Jodey. He pushed unceremoniously past and inside glared about him. A choking sound in a dusky corner drew his eyes. He catfooted that way and presently could believe that the sacklike object on the floor was a human being. He was stooping to investigate more closely when a veritable tornado struck him from behind.

King had fought some powerful men in his day; fought them with fists and primitive wrestling holds. But never a grip had been put on him like that of the gorilla arms of Jodey, seizing him from behind. He was lifted clear off the floor, and the great arms squeezed until King thought his ribs must crack. He collapsed; head dropping forward and rolling limply. Jodey grunted in a sort of savage satisfaction and let him drop.

King lay crumpled on the floor until he thought he could use his arms. Out of an eye corner he watched Jodey, who stood looking alternately at King and at that sack-swathed figure in the corner. King gathered himself and rolled over. Jodey was standing with huge hand almost upon a double-bitted ax. With a speed and deftness King had not expected in his hulking bulk, he snatched up the ax and jumped forward. It came down straight for King, who was still shaky and stumbled as he tried to crawl away. Then a pistol roared in the door behind Jodey.

The ax buried itself to the handle hole in the floor, an inch from King's shoulder, so close that he thought he

must be struck. Again and again the Colt bellowed, and Jodey, who had whirled and, empty-handed, lurched toward Pablo, finally dropped.

King ignored this as by-play. He jerked at the lashings on the woman—for woman he now saw it to be. He jerked off the sack, and a haggard, wild-eyed Zalma glared at him. She was gagged, and when he took the wadded neckerchief from her mouth she swore like any *buscadero*. Then she tried to get up.

"Wolf! He—just tied me—gone to—that woman's cabin—"

King streaked for the back door. He was barely outside when he heard the uproar in Molly Bland's cabin. It sounded as if everything breakable in the place were being smashed. He panted up the slope and hurled himself at the door. It was barred. He looked around for something with which to smash it, or to break in a window. A bullet came through the door; another.

Again and again he threw himself against the door. Wolf, inside, was yelling something. The girl's thin scream, too, cut through the deeper tones of Wolf like a knife. She was telling King that Wolf was armed.

Again and again bullets came bursting through the heavy planks. Wolf was trying to find him by altering the position of his pistol muzzle, which seemed to be rammed against the door. King looked hazily at the windows. But they were shuttered. Then he saw the big chimney.

He jerked off his shell belts and let them drop with the pistols that hung to them. He tore the tying-down thongs from his thighs. He ran backward a few steps, then forward. He twisted sidewise as his finger tips caught the eaves of the cabin roof. He was on it and running like a cat up the shakes to the chimney. It was a huge thing, and he let himself down into it, heedless of the rough edges of the stones. He was cruelly torn by sharp points. But he landed with a crash

among the pots and pans on the big stone hearth.

WOLF WHITLOW fired what was evidently the last shell in his pistol. But facing the terrible, blood-stained, soot-blackened apparition that was King Malloy, he was too shaken to do more than aim instinctively. The bullet splattered on a stone of the chimney and bits of lead stung King. Then he lurched forward and suddenly ran in, twisting away from the clubbing blow Wolf struck at him with long pistol barrel.

He got the long neck in one hand and pounded Wolf in the body, regardless of the blows that Wolf struck with less and less force. The pistol dropped. King let go his holds and caught Wolf by shoulder and crotch, then hurled him clear across the cabin to crash against the wall and lie still.

King looked dazedly about him. The rough table was overturned; so were the plank benches. The floor was a litter of bright blankets, crumpled and smeared. And in a corner, crouching against the wall, was Molly Bland, her face shining like white paper in the gloom. King went stiffly over to her and looked down, licking dry lips.

"Honey!" he whispered. "I guess I went crazy!"

"I kept saying it—to myself—as I fought him—that if I could only keep out of his way a little longer; just a little longer," she breathed and clawed up along the wall until she swayed on her feet. "For you said—you remember—that you'd come. I knew you'd come—and kill him! But I didn't know if you'd come in time."

She put her hand over her eyes. He thought she was going to collapse. He caught her and she opened dark eyes and smiled weakly up at him. Then she saw his left arm, down which blood was dripping slowly. She straightened abruptly and cried out: "He must be bandaged; he was hurt."

King looked without interest at the flesh wound made by one of Wolf's bullets.

"It's nothin'—nothin' at all," he said. "An' you—you're everything. Why, you are, I do 'no'. I have only seen you—this makes the fourth time! I'm goin' to take you away from here."

"Take me with you—wherever you go! If you have to dodge officers, we'll both dodge them. I can ride now. My arm is well. I haven't a soul in the world—but you. And from the first time I saw you, I knew that I'd never seen any one like you. But you didn't look at me that first time."

Her arms came up about his neck. She clung to him like a frightened child—yet not altogether like a child, either. In her face was the subtle something that would have told him, if he had seen it, that she was not girl, but woman, now—his woman. But his face was pressed against the dusky mass of her hair. He lifted her chin with a slow hand.

"You really mean that—you'll go with me—time without end, amen? Really? Think hard, girl!"

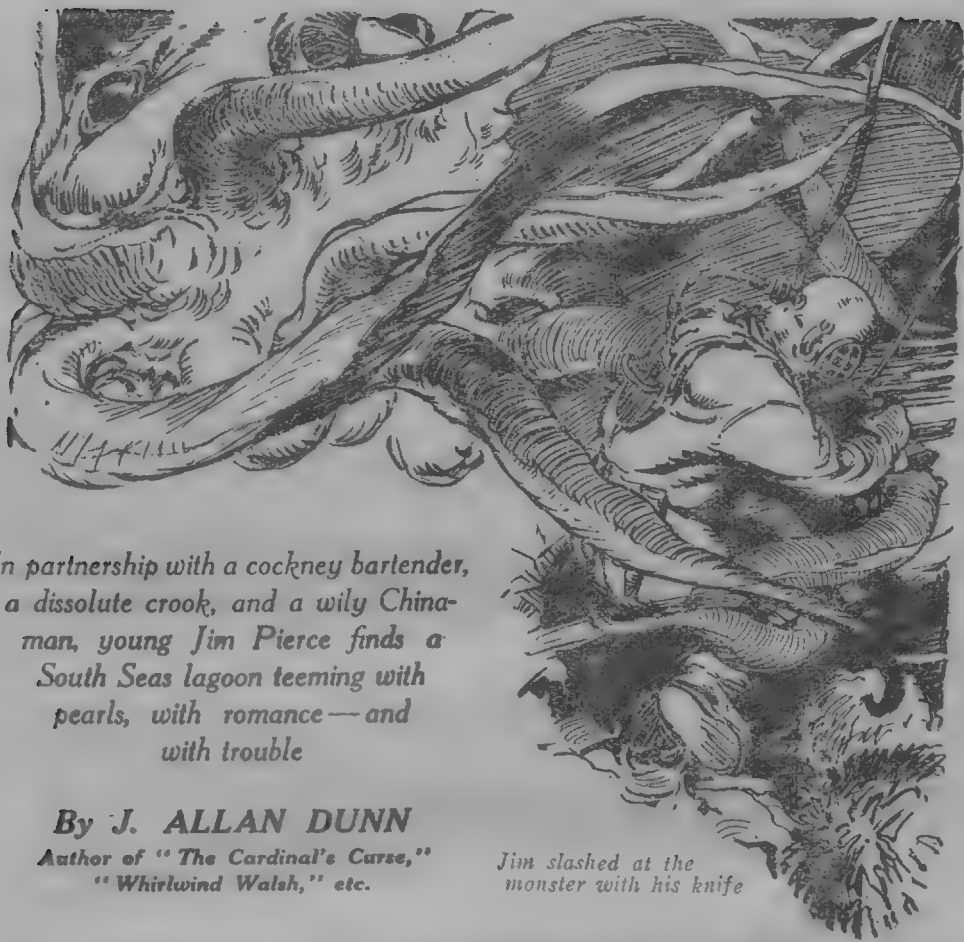
"I mean it!"

"Then I reckon we won't do any dodgin', honey! I have got a pardon waitin' down at Talus, I reckon. An' we'll go down an' hunt us up Judge Randall—if he charges for marryin' us, I swear I'll rob his house to pay him!—an' we'll start out as an honest nester family. We're done with the High Lines, honey. An' with High Line Riders."

Pablo was yelling outside; yelling urgently. But when King replied that all was well within the cabin—very well, indeed—there came a period of thick silence. Then Pablo's voice again, very meek; oh, most suspiciously meek!

"King, my old one. That promise now. I buy the new boots for the dancing? Ha? Don't answer, if you won't; but I buy the new boots!"

The Lost Lagoon



In partnership with a cockney bartender, a dissolute crook, and a wily Chinaman, young Jim Pierce finds a South Seas lagoon teeming with pearls, with romance—and with trouble

By J. ALLAN DUNN

*Author of "The Cardinal's Curse,"
"Whirlwind Walsh," etc.*

*Jim slashed at the
monster with his knife*

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

JIM PIERCE, young traders' agent in the South Seas, and Rance, another agent, but a dissolute man partly gone native, find a dying *kanaka* in a boat; the sole survivor of the Flying Scud, which had gone after diving equipment to work a rich new pearl lagoon. They get the location of the unknown isle, and take as partners Blimy Johnson, cockney saloon-keeper, who owns the schooner *Elsie*, and Wong Lee, who has some diving equipment.

They succeed in entering the lagoon,

where Powers, the discoverer, is supposed to be holding down his claim and waiting for his men in the Flying Scud to return. On the shore, a girl waves to them.

CHAPTER VI.

PERILS.

MARY POWERS, twenty, slender, sunburned beyond intention; well-cut features, a little lined and drawn with responsibility

This story began in the *Argosy-Allstory Weekly* for May 25.

and worry. Brave of eyes as blue as the sea beyond the outer reef, brave of shapely chin. Dressed as girls dress who emulate the freedom of their brothers, breeched and booted, but with curves that proclaimed her femininity.

She came down to the beach to meet them as they landed and her eyes looked through the gaze of Rance as if he was a man of glass, ignored Blimy and rested on Pierce, getting out of the stern.

He stepped forward, doing the talking, explaining briefly why they had come, mincing nothing.

"We did not expect to find you here," he said. "This is frankly a business expedition. Rance and myself"—he nodded toward the other man—"are, or were, traders' agents on Paradise Island, where your whale-boat drifted in with Taura, the sole survivor. Johnson runs a public store. There is another of our quartet on board, Wong Lee. He furnished a diving equipment such as your father was going to buy. Taura was close to death from three weeks' exposure in an open boat. He had two pearls with him which aroused our interest, though I trust we would have made an effort to rescue your father in any case. Johnson furnished the only available ship. I am the navigator. We imagined your father would be grateful for our appearance. We are poor and not very successful men, and it seemed a chance to realize on his gratitude, to become partners of his, with our outfit to fish the lagoon for shell and pearls and share equally in the profits."

She heard him through silently, her gaze wandering over Rance and Johnson.

"I think I understand," she said. "We have been worried over not hearing from the Flying Scud. Hansen and the crew were all friends, sharers in what we found. That can be transferred to the living. I stayed with my father, naturally. I have sailed

with him for several years. He will be glad, as I am, to meet you, to thank you, and recompense you. The lagoon is, of course, not private. A diving outfit is necessary. My father, who is not well, though he is better than he was, will, I am sure, recognize your natural idea to realize on the shell and pearls. There are not many open lagoons. It's fortunate for us that Taura was still alive to tell you of my father's plight. The pearls he had were to pay for the diving equipment."

Her manner was formal, almost stilted, as Pierce's own had been. He could see that the loss of the men on the Flying Scud had affected her so that she took refuge in pet phrases; saw also, with a tingle in his blood, that she looked to him. He fished in his pocket for his wallet, took out the pearl.

"Rance," he said, "you have the other."

Rance did not hesitate. He brought out the other pearl, handed it to Pierce. The girl refused them, but Pierce insisted. Blimy's face was a blank.

"We'll fix things up with your father," said Pierce. "These belong to you."

Her hand touched his for a moment. It was cold, but it seemed to him that there was something passed between them in the contact.

"My father is asleep," she said. "That was why I did not see you sooner. I could hardly believe my eyes. He was despondent. Now he will cheer up."

She smiled as she said it, but there was effort beyond it. Pierce believed that she looked deep into their eyes with her woman's instinct, weighed the newcomers and found them wanting. He was one of them. There was no reason why she should think differently of him. But he hoped she did.

"If he can see us later on," he said diffidently. "Meantime, how are you off for stores?"

"We have plenty. You will come up for supper, please? I will come down to the beach before sunset and show you the way." She nodded, turned and left them.

"You handled it nicely, Pierce," said Rance. "We'll let you be spokesman, in the preliminaries."

"Blimy, but she's heasy to look at," said Johnson. "Who'd 'ave thought it? Old man sick, too."

"WE must not take advantage of his condition," said Rance suavely. Pierce looked at him in astonishment, then with a swift comprehension of the real nature of the man. He had not seen or spoken with a decent white woman for years. The girl had aroused memories, and desires. Pierce saw in him the sleek lawyer, sailing close to the reefs of the bar, clever, unscrupulous, swift to reap the harvest of other's misfortunes, taking full advantage. His new veneer betrayed his utter rascality. In that moment Pierce lost all trust in him, in his sense of honesty.

Blimy was of another world. He recognized the difference between him and the girl. He was carnal enough, but the beast in him would be teased to cross the sharp line of breeding only if released by strong excitation. He wanted pearls. If the girl stood in his way he might sweep her aside, but he did not covet her. And Rance did, though old enough to be her father. It showed subtly in his speech, his manner.

Pierce forgot the pearls. Here was a girl with a sick father, defenseless, and he meant to champion her cause. He was not in love with her, consciously, though he admired her attitude, her courage.

Wong, who did not care for white girls, would be ruthless. Pierce faced the issue squarely. They were poachers, pirates who meant to enrich themselves. In a way their claims were just, but they would not be content

with just division. He saw that clearly, and resolved to try and establish matters on a fair basis and carry them through. Blimy was a frail reed, but he might use him. He had one good eard. They could not leave the island without him to guide them. Farui was not equal to it.

Moreover, he flattered himself that he could handle the crew if it came to a pinch. He could not persuade himself that he was prejudiced. He had seen too much of the others on the trip to expect their eagerness to be offset by any sense of fair play. Something depended upon Powers, his condition.

There was a small pile of rotted out shell on the beach, and Rance walked over to it and examined it.

"It's gold-lip all right," he said. "This is a real find."

"To be taken as we find it." Pierce uttered the words involuntarily. Rance looked at him and laughed.

"Precisely," he said, picking up a shell. Blimy kicked Pierce on the ankle, shook his head, with a finger to his lips in warning.

"Tyke it heasy, like Wong said," he whispered, then started to hum as Rance looked up.

"We'll play this straight," said Rance. "Six shares. That gives Powers and his daughter a third. Without us they'd have nothing to realize on. Let's get back to the schooner. We'll live there, I suppose, when we're not visiting, unless we make a camp ashore, later on."

Wong made one of the supper party. He had brought a small lacquered chest on board and he appeared immaculately clad in brocaded silk of dark purple. His lack of interest in the daughter was discounted by his desire to see the father. Wong was a force to be reckoned with. Pierce recognized that.

Powers was a sick man. He sat up to receive them. They lived in a double tent, with a platform between, and a small shack of woven palm

fronds that was used as a kitchen. Evidently they had lived ashore before in similar fashion. Comforts had been brought off from the Flying Scud. Mary Powers had changed to a frock. Wong offered to help her with the meal, explaining that he was the cook aboard the Elsie, a statement she received with gravity. Wong did not look much like a cook, but the girl did look like one who had seen a good deal of South Seas life. It was a simple meal, without liquor, to Blimy's chagrin. But he liked the phonograph records, and offered to bring his concertina ashore.

"If you do," said Rance, "I'll slit its throat. I'm fed up with it." He laughed as he said it, and Blimy contrived a wry smile, but there was an undercurrent of reality that neither the girl nor her father missed, Pierce thought.

POWERS was genial, but he was a shrewd observer. He was not over-cordial, and was anxious to talk business.

"I became ill through my own folly," he said. "There are heavy sulphur deposits on the north side. I don't like to overlook things, even if I don't go into them myself. It occurred to me there might be money in it by transporting the ore and manufacturing sulphuric acid. I have friends who might be interested, so I made some explorations. There is a lake here which is largely hydrochloric acid, formed, I think, by the chlorides from the salt water flowing through underground fissures, combining with the sulphates of the lake's bed. I should have been content with the pearls, but they lie deep, and, while the Flying Scud was away, I put in the time investigating. The lake is warm, and it gives off chlorine gas. There are numerous places where hot sulphur fumes affect the eyes. All told, the north end is a good place to keep away from. But I was inquisitive as well

as acquisitive, and I explored this side of the tableland you must have marked. There are caves there, and I went in too far. I got gassed, literally, as we did in the war. I got out before I fell, which was all that saved my life, and I got home, but I have had a bad time since. Now I can get proper treatment, when you gentlemen leave and take me with you. I can promise you inducement enough, and there is always the shell, if you want to come back for it. Personally, I don't think the island is going to last very long. It gets pretty quavery at times, and even on this end there are mushroom craters forming overnight and sending up their little spouts of steam. We get an earthquake once a fortnight, at least, and I think they increase in violence. There is a harvest in the lagoon, but I think it should be reaped soon."

A fit of coughing shook him until he was on the point of collapse. Pierce wanted to leave, but Powers shook his head.

"We may as well get down to business," he said feebly. "Without me you would not have found this place; without you, it is likely my daughter and I would not leave it. We should be able to come to terms, to get to work. We won't have long. If that crater shaft ever gets badly clogged up there's going to be ructions on this island."

Even as he spoke there came a dull roar from the distant crater, whose voice had insensibly blended with the wind and the surf that came up to them. The earth quivered and the table shook so that the dishes left on it rattled. There was a far off rumble.

"The mesa is falling to pieces," said Powers. "The base of it is all rocks and detritus. There's not much time to lose, gentlemen. How about a sharing agreement?"

"A third to you," said Rance. "Transportation, of course. The rest to be divided among us, four of us."

"I suggest a half," said Pierce. There was a little silence. He thought the girl looked at him with a new interest.

"I think what Lance say O. K.," said Wong blandly, but decisively.

"Right," said Blimy. "Wot's right is right."

"I am in your hands," said Powers. "If I were in your position, I should consider that equable. The lagoon is rich, beyond a doubt. Call it a third. And get to work, or you'll have nothing."

"It's not fair," said Pierce. "Powers—"

"Look here, Jim," Rance broke in. "As long as Mr. Powers is satisfied you should be. You're the youngest here, excepting Miss Mary"—Pierce saw her wince at the familiarity—"you've only got a quarter vote on our side. Our host is tired. It's a bargain, Powers."

He rose, his gaze on the girl. She flushed. Powers half rose. Pierce found his fists clenched and he flung off Blimy's grasp on his arm.

"We'll talk it over on the ship," he said. "Good night, Miss Powers and Mr. Powers. Thank you for your hospitality. We'll endeavor not to abuse it."

"I don't like the way you talked, Pierce," said Rance on their way down. "You seem to carry your skipper'ship off the schooner. It won't do. Powers is lucky to get anything. A lot of folks would help themselves."

"You mean to," said Pierce. He was willing to provoke a quarrel. Wong interfered.

"You two all same damn fools," he said incisively. There was an assumption of superiority about him that checked both of them, made them feel absurd. "No use make bobbely all time," Wong continued. "Lance, you mo' old than Jim. This business plop-osition. Evelything go all lightee, suppose evelybody keep cool. Jim, he see

lil gel, likee too much. Both young. Maybe she likee him some time. Velly nice. But Jim think you likee lil gel all same, Lance, an' he no likee that. All damfoolishness. Lance not think that way. We catch pearl. Suppose Jim likee give lil gel all he get, all lightee. But now evelybody pull one way, so we all get lich. Gel plenty nuisance all time along business plop-osition. In light place, light time, velly nice."

RANCE began to laugh. He flung an arm over Pierce's shoulder in a gesture of familiarity that Pierce endured, though it took an effort. He felt childish. Wong was dead right, of course.

"Don't get any idea like that into your head, Jim," Rance said. "I'm old enough to be that pretty, plucky kid's father. I'm wise enough not to make a fool of myself thinking she'd have any use for me. I don't suppose you intended it as a play to win her good graces when you stood up for Powers having a half interest, but I wouldn't be surprised but that she considered you her champion. I've been in love myself, son, when I was your age. Really in love. It's the finest thing in the world, when it clicks, but Wong is dead right, those things shouldn't interfere with business. Your obligations to us as your partners come first. But I'm sure we all wish you good luck with the lady."

It sounded genial, if a trifle condescending. It was almost convincing. But Pierce had seen a new, or perhaps the old, Rance emerging of late from the sloth of Paradise Island. Quite capable of playing a rôle, pleased to essay it. He would have been a pleading lawyer, a jury convincer, Pierce thought, as he fancied the speech a little too specious, too abruptly abnegating, insincere.

It struck him also that, of the four of them, Rance had supplied nothing but the preliminary idea. Pierce was

not sure that he would have thought of it, but Wong certainly would. Blimy had smelled out something when he met them on the beach. Even Boozy Farrell had been trailing their launch in the whaleboat that morning.

Rance was sitting pretty. Wong put up stores and a diving outfit. Blimy had the Elsie. Pierce had supplied the launch and now was navigator. They were all working for Rance.

But Pierce managed to laugh.

"All right, Rance. I'm the junior. If I'd been Powers I should have expected at least a half, but business is business and naturally you're out to get all you can. Powers is lucky to have us come along, especially if he's right about the island blowing up some day. We'll get at it to-morrow. I suppose it's up to you and me to do the diving. I was talking to Powers about it and he said he'd give me some tips. Blimy's out of it, with his heart."

"I'm afraid I'm out of it, too," said Rance, his voice sounding rueful. "I can't stand the pressure. My heart's fairly sound, but I've got varicose, badly."

"I dive," said Wong calmly. "Can do. I savvy how."

He meant it. He possessed that unvarying quality of not wasting words or actions. His mind might not be single-tracked, but it had its system, planned for his own ends.

That night saw the beginning of the gambling. Wong undoubtedly had money and Blimy might have a little, but Rance was broke and Pierce almost so. Now they had tangible prospects. Pierce liked poker, but he did not care for Wong's idea of *vingt-et-un*. In it the face-cards were discarded. The dealer bought the privilege and bet against the others coming closer to twenty-one with the aggregate of their pips than he did, drawing as many cards as they liked. When results were even the bank took half the punter's stake.

It was swift and Pierce had an idea

that Wong's fingers were swifter. Blimy had chips and the stakes were high from the start. Pierce got out of it on the plea of deck inspection, and when he looked through the skylight they had forgotten him. Wong had the bank—and most of the chips.

The Elsie carried two sixteen-foot surf boats, on port and starboard slings, with a small dinghy at the taffrail. This was in the water, trailing. The crew had brought off coconuts, breadfruit and red bananas in it. They had caught silver mullet and had a feast, eating the fish raw after it had been *lomi-lomi'd* between their fingers and treated with fresh lime juice. Now they were forward chanting native *meles*.

They paid no attention to Pierce as he sculled himself ashore with a stern sweep. The moon rode high among the stars that were doubled in the lagoon. The scent of sweet fern and vines, mingled with night-blooming *cereus* and *frangipani*, came from the land. He could see the top of the smoke over the crater and he thought it held a ruddy reflection though it might have been the moonlight on the rolling vapor.

He wanted to get away from the others. Rance's talk, Wong's direct exposition of things, had set him thinking. Girls had never interested him very much, save that he was human enough, liked to dance and was not averse to a bit of petting. But he had been cut off from his own crowd when his father went smash, and since he had been on his own, money had been short enough for his own needs. There were few white girls in the South Seas. This was the first one he had seen. And she was the first girl who had ever set him dreaming.

POWERS had sized up the newcomers for slightly masked marauders. His daughter was shrewd and she had her feminine intuitions. If they were strong enough she might give

Pierce a different rating, but he was tied up with the three, part of their enterprise. They might play fair. He doubted it. They needed him. Rance was trying to feed him hokum. Wong, too, in his own way. But Pierce meant to see the Powerses got their share. Navigation was his ace in the hole. He could be stiff about it—and would.

If all went well, he would be rich, might be very rich. He did not want a life of leisure, though he did want to travel, to know men and things from the inside, before he chose some definite occupation. His father had declared that a lad ought to learn the value of college before he went to it. Pierce thought of that now and subscribed to it. He had gone through college, but the world at large was a greater university.

He could afford to marry. He had scoffed at the idea, so far; it tied a man down—but not with the right sort of girl. A girl who went adventuring with her father. Mary Powers.

He was far up the beach, watching the scuttling crabs, the break of the combers on the barrier reef, curving with sea-fire in their foam and hollow that was mirrored in the stiller water before they broke in pale flashes of lambency.

He rounded a little cape, wading through the wash, and found himself in a tiny bay of exquisite beauty under the moon. A fall splashed over the cliff into a pool above tide water. It shone like burnished silver and he went toward it for a drink. The schooner was out of sight, out of mind. He had left sordid things behind.

A figure rose as he neared the pool. It was Mary Powers.

"I was thinking about you," she said frankly. "Wondering how you got mixed up with that crowd. You're not their sort. They're out for all they can get and they wouldn't hesitate to cheat each other, or worse. That includes you, and us. They're crooks."

Her formal way was gone. Pierce

responded in kind. Immediately they were talking together naturally, youth to youth. There were not many years between them. She seemed to Pierce as old as he was and fully as wise. Plainly she trusted him or she would not have started by running down his partners.

"It's easy enough to tell," he said. "Of course you didn't enter into it then."

"Leave me out of it now, for awhile. I don't think you're the kind to think every girl has to be flattered. That sort of thing doesn't fit down here."

He told her everything, including his own opinion about the trio on board, his determination to see that she and her father got their share which he still felt should be larger.

"Dad said you meant it," she said. "He agreed with me that you were straight. Of course we've heard of Paradise Island. A traders' agent job is a rotten one at best, and being beached with an outfit like that made it worse. You were green at it and you sized them up pretty well, but you don't know as much about them as we do. Dad, I mean. I've heard what he said—and other hearsay. Wong got chased out of Australia for being a fence for Chinese smuggled in there. He was the distributor. Nothing very villainous about that, perhaps, but they say he starved the poor devils. They found bodies in the vegetable garden he ran as a blind. He left his partner to face the police, left him with his throat cut after he'd taken all his money. That's your sleek Wong Lee."

"Johnson, the one you call Blimy, was steward on the Rotorua, on the run between San Francisco and Sydney. He wasn't actually caught stealing, but there was no question but that he sold the stores, smuggled stuff, and they thought he was responsible for a lot of theft the passengers complained of. I don't know anything about Rance, except that I have less use for him than the others. He's as clever as

Wong. He may be cleverer, especially if, as you say, he was once a lawyer. Chinks are often overrated because they know how to look wise and say little. I wouldn't doubt that Rance would try to play Blimy off against Wong somehow. He's slimy as one of those spotted sea-snakes. Of course they don't think we know anything about them. It's funny how men forget they are notorious; like a lot of ostriches, sticking their heads in the sand. The South Seas is a poor place to hide."

"IT'S a cheerful crowd," said Pierce. "Murderer, smuggler, swindler—and sucker. Yours truly. I'll let them go on thinking me one. They won't tip me off to their plans. I think they've all got different ideas, all playing a waiting game, but they'll have to fix up some sort of combination."

"Don't you go down after shell," warned the girl. "It's too easy a way of getting rid of a man. And you're not experienced. It's dangerous enough for an underwater man. There are queer creatures in that lagoon. I've seen funny things there when I've been sitting on the cliff where you saw me first. Great bubbles coming up. Big shapes of fish—not sharks. Sharks can't get in, and they wouldn't have stayed there voluntarily while that sand spit grew. These are brutes that have bred there. *Tonus*, ten feet long and big around as a jewfish. They've got spiny heads four feet across with jaws bigger than a shark and eyes like saucers. They are mottled and spotted so you can hardly see them against the weed and coral, and they've got side fins like wings with which they fan the water, hovering. You've seen rock cod. Imagine one enlarged twenty or thirty times, and you've got a *tonu*."

"I'm not much worried about fish," said Pierce. "They say if you squirt bubbles at a shark you can scare it off."

"Squirting bubbles at a *tonu* would be like chucking peas at an angry rhinoceros. They can swim rings

around a shark. Dad saw one take a diver. He was using his waterglass and he saw it grab the native and float down to the bottom with the poor devil's legs hanging out of the jaws. They tried to get the brute, but they never did. Also, there's a giant squid in there. I saw its tentacles out of water at the lower end, two of them, wriggling in the air. It must have caught something in the shallows. I saw only the lower ends, but they were thicker than your arm, tapering like whips, suckered. You'll have land devils at one end of your life-line and sea devils at the other. Don't dive."

"I'm going down, just the same," said Pierce. He did not think she was belittling his courage, but he meant to go and she was not going to change his mind for him though he appreciated her interest. "I've always wanted to. Wong takes the same risks. They won't monkey with my air or lifeline. They'll look out for me. They won't lose their navigator."

"Are you sure Wong can't handle a schooner?"

"I've wondered. He might be able to. But I'll have Farui running the pump and handling me."

She shrugged her shoulders and rose from where they were sitting.

"Have it your own way. Men are stubborn things—in some ways. I've got to get back to dad. You'll be up to talk over the diving? You see he's got the lagoon pretty well plotted out."

"You didn't lose any of your men with *tonus* and squid, did you?"

"No. But they're there. I'm not trying to throw a scare into you. I just wish you wouldn't go down." She held out her hand like a boy, but it was not at all like one in the contact. He went back to the schooner with many thoughts making confused patterns in his head like the bits of colored glass in a kaleidoscope.

The crew were asleep. There was no necessity for anchor watch. Rance

was on deck, smoking, listening to the rumble of the crater.

"On such a night as this," he said. "A great night for lovers. No offense, Jim. Wish you all the luck in the world. We'll get pearls, and you'll have some one to set them off. I envy you. Blimy is getting trimmed," he went on. "Fancies himself at cards. I've seen him do several tricks with them, but I don't think he's Wong's equal. I know I'm not. I've lost enough. I can use all I get in this deal of ours. I'm an old dog, and I've got the bone-burying instinct I neglected in my youth."

Blimy was scarlet from liquor and the game. Wong was the same as ever.

"You've 'ad hall the bloody luck," said Blimy. "But I'll best you in the long run. I never saw such blinkin' luck," he added. "What 'ave you two been up to? You look as if you'd been 'atching something."

Rance winked at Pierce.

"We've been on deck discussing seismology."

"What in 'ell is that?"

"The study of earthquakes and the'r attendant phenomena. *Wondering how long the island will last. To-morrow we go at the lagoon."

"You ought to study the hart of using hordinary language," grumbled Blimy as he emptied the gin bottle—not his first—into his glass. "Hi'm turning in."

CHAPTER VII.

DOWN IN THE PURPLE DEPTHS.

THERE were preliminaries to the actual diving. A platform raft had to be built to carry the pump and men who helped with the diving. Powers came down, short of breath and feeble, and gave his suggestions. He pointed out where the best shell, as far as pearls counted, lay.

There could be some diving for the *kanakas* in shallower waters, but they were unlikely to yield much but shell,

and so the idea was abandoned. He talked earnestly with Pierce about the technique of diving and warned him again about *tonus* and squid, cautioning him against caverns and crevices. The latter might hold enormous eels, serpents of the sea with sharp teeth that could tear through the fabric of the suit and the flesh of the man inside it.

"Your friend Wong seems capable of getting along without advice," he said dryly. "He's been down before."

Wong was busy overhauling the suit and apparatus, patching, testing. He was to descend first. The girl was not in evidence, perhaps because of Rance, Pierce thought; perhaps because she was vexed at Pierce's obstinacy. But he was not going to shirk anything that Wong did. Farui was competent and they were friends. The islander had tended divers before at Paradise.

Farui, too, had some tips to give out; how to wrench the big shells free with a sidewise twist; how Pierce must be sure to wear his leather gloves for fear of the poison in scratches from living coral.

It was the second morning, the girl still absent, when Wong went down. He looked like a mechanical man as he advanced toward the long ladder they had rigged so that he could halt forty feet down and adjust the pressure. He dragged his feet in their fourteen-pound shoes, turned round, and slowly descended, the lifeline lashed inside his leather jacket. Pierce watched him swaying down the ladder where he rested and arranged exhaust and intake valves to suit himself, sending bubbles streaming upward before he went lumbering on to the depths. A weighted basket was lowered and presently shell began to come up.

These Rance and Johnson seized, opening them, feeling under the mantle for pearls, tossing the fleshy bodies into an empty kerosene can for more thorough investigation by the *kanakas*. They got seeds and baroques, but only

one fair-sized pearl and that had a flat spot.

Wong stayed down forty minutes, all told. He would go down again in the afternoon. The suit leaked slightly, but the water was warm and he was in good shape. He rested on the ladder for several minutes on the way up and seemed none the worse for the submersion. They had no air lock and Wong lay flat on his back after they had stripped the suit and helmet from him, breathing carefully.

It was Pierce's turn. He was nervous, undeniably, his pulses beating fast, but he did not show it as they adjusted the gear. A hundred and seventy pounds of weight in all he must pack, at a forty-five pound pressure. The goggles limited his gaze, but he looked toward the cliff and saw a slight figure standing on the verge of the bush.

Slowly he went down the wobbly ladder of bamboo and stayed on the last rung for his feet. One ear hurt as if the drum would break, then the other. He remembered his instructions, held his breath, swallowed and then blew hard, clearing the passages. Things loosened up immediately. But he was still stuffy and he worked first at the intake valve at his waist and then at the exhaust beside his cheek, until he was comfortable.

Above, a *kanaka* steadily turned the crank of the air pump with Farui watching the gauge, tending the life-line. Pierce's little engine would have been useful, but man-power was cheap and the islanders were lusty, with plenty of them to spell each other. Nervousness left him and he let go, floating down, kept upright by his heavy shoes, down into a purplish twilight that he had fancied would be green. Deep bluish purple. He made no attempt to look up, almost an impossibility in the helmet clamped to the leather yoke of the jacket.

It was like walking in ordinary moonlight with the moon seen through a purple medium. The bottom was

dense coral, a score of fantastic varieties of still-water species. Plants fragile as meadow blooms. Leafless shrubs, others like the ones the Chinese make from jade and crystal, marvelously colored. Mushrooms growing on ten-foot stalks towering above sea-brush; sponges, corals like a man's brain, fan-shaped coral. Shoals of small, inquisitive fish whose radiant hues were tempered in that eerie light, drifting and darting here and there, scurrying as larger fish came sailing by.

A big spotted moray, a sea-snake, twisting and looping, surveyed him and passed on as he waded clumsily, with a curious sense of being in a fourth dimension where gravity was relative, over the uneven floor that rose in ridges, sank in ravines. He crushed through crisp growth, brushing aside clinging lengths of impeding weed.

The basket came down to him and he marked it. He must not lose his sense of direction, he told himself, forgetting the guiding line. It was unreal and for awhile he forgot his business there in the strange surroundings. A big silver horsefish, four feet long, goggle-eyed, came out of a dark cleft and hovered within a foot of his face.

HE adjusted his valves once more, streams of silvery bubbles going up from his waist. Then he looked for oysters on piles of coral and the edges of the gullies. They looked like lumps of rock with coral and barnacles growing on them, Powers had said.

One thing they had not told him—that the oysters lay open, seeking sustenance. He had imagined them closed. This did not help him, since they were colorless in that pallid light. But one of them suddenly closed up, sensitive to a shadow that passed above it, the body of a fish that might or might not be seeking to snatch at its flesh, a procedure fraught with danger of a nipped nose.

Pierce grasped the closed shell, twist-

ing at its fibrous anchor ropes, trying to wrench it free with a sudden move, succeeding. There was another close by, many, now that he suddenly seemed able to distinguish them. He filled the basket and returned for more.

It was the fascinating lottery of the sea. In any one of those rough shells there might be a pearl, though Wong had been over much the same ground.

He came to a place where high pinacles of coral rose toward the surface, the bottom riven with crannies and the mouths of gloomy caves. Once he saw the writhing tentacles of a squid, but it was not large and he avoided it. There was no sign of *tonus*. He tried the experiment of squirting air at other big fish and found it frightened them. His movements were sluggish and hampered. He had a knife and wondered how well he could wield it.

What time had passed he did not know. He had sent up several baskets when he saw two monster oysters on the rocky wall of a great cavern. His head was beginning to pound and his heart to thump, but he wanted to get them. There were other lumps inside, tempting. He got one off when he felt a tug at his lifeline. They were warning him he had stayed the limit; Farui, watchful of the novice.

He was ready to go up. He had made good. He had a hunch there was a pearl in the last shell he still grasped in his hand. But there was too much blood in his head, he was getting dizzy. As the lifeline tugged at him he worked at the valves, suddenly realizing he had reached his limit.

The exhaust valve was clogged with silt he had raised at the entrance to the cave. His suit began to inflate like a balloon and his helmet ripped off from the pressure.

He grabbed at it and held it down. He went lunging up. Never mind the ladder. His senses reeled. Somehow the helmet held enough air to last him to the surface and there hands grasped

him and hauled him out on the platform, taking off the helmet and the suit swiftly as he lay like a stranded fish, gasping, still holding on to the big shell.

Farui was working over him, kneading him, making him drink saltwater that he spewed out. His lungs seemed to have been set in a vacuum. His diaphragm would not work, but gradually he felt better, recognized faces, explained what had happened to the valve. Powers was there. Rance and Blimy were with Wong in a little group that broke up as Pierce revived.

"You got a prime," said Rance. "Twenty pearls like that and we're fixed. Beginner's luck. Where did you find it?"

He felt a tinge of resentment at their apathy at his condition, but dismissed it. He saw the pearl gleaming between Rance's thumb and forefinger. It looked as big as a marble.

"Finest pearl I've ever seen," said Powers. "They'll bid high for that. Pilaski and Schimmel in Papeete will battle for it. It's as good as sold."

Pierce described the cavern. He was exhausted, but he soon began to feel normal. Blimy gave him a drink of Hollands that warmed him and restored circulation. Next time things would be better.

Wong went down again later on and his baskets came up full. There were five good pearls among them, but nothing that matched or came anywhere near matching the prize.

"Plenty good shell," said Wong. "I not go velly fah inside that place. Something live along there I not like."

At three in the afternoon Pierce went down again. He found he could move more freely this time, see better. Wong had stripped the entrance to the cave, but Pierce could dimly see more oysters and, spurred with success, he ventured in, careful not to foul his lines.

He was not forgetting Wong's warning, not going too far into the Stygian

den that might hold anything. It was easy enough to conjure up a weird monster lurking there. He thought of Mary Powers's story of the octopus and then he saw a line of rough shells, closed, furry with parasitic growth, and the fever of the lottery gripped him.

He could only carry two of the bivalves at one time, so big were they; heavy, too, though weight was relative down here. He had a whimsical thought of how Einstein would like to be in his place. His valves were balanced and he wrenched vigorously at first one shell and then at the second, got it free and turned toward the entrance of the grotto.

SOMETHING shot across his limited line of vision, like a thick whip of weed endowed with life. It closed around one leg and he felt as if electrodes had been applied there. He dropped his shells and slashed at the vicious thing with his knife, cutting through the tentacle as another closed about his left wrist. He severed that, struggling on. His air still came freely, but he was in desperate plight. He felt a heavy coil about his waist, constricting. The light at the cavern entrance was blocked by a confused, writhing mass. Dimly he made out great staring eyes as big as plates, a hideous beak, a huge globular body.

He had heard tales of natives biting an octopus between the eyes. The memory flashed in his brain as he plied his knife, struggling on. There was no chance of sending his blade home there. He was held off in the mighty coils that still sought him.

The bowl-shaped suckers, toothed, clung to him as he jerked his lifeline and felt the answering tug, slicing left and right, the distal ends still clinging as he was dragged toward the surface and the blessed sun. Evil bubbleings broke all about him as they hauled him out, the *kanakas* exclaiming as they saw the lopped terminals.

He was not hurt, and felt conscious of no damage, though when he stripped later, he found crimson splotches on his flesh where the suckers had left their mark.

"There's a fortune down there," he said, "and we're going to get it."

"Blimy!" said Johnson, watching the squirming ends, still vital. "'E must be a whopper. That wot you meant, Wong?"

"I not know what it was," said Wong. "Only I feel something is inside that place."

"It's the big octopus Mary saw," said Powers. "It owns the cave. You've sliced it, but you haven't killed it. They say the arms grow again, like a newt's tail."

Rance stood looking sourly on.

"That was the real treasure house of the lagoon," he said. "It's too bad if we have to abandon it."

"I not go along that place again," said Wong quietly. "Pearl no good to me if I not live to see it."

"Why don't you have a shot at it?" said Powers to Rance. "The pressure wouldn't hurt you, for once." Rance shot a nasty look at him.

"I'm going down again," said Pierce. "Rance, there's a hot-water bag on the schooner. Why can't we put a stick of dynamite inside, cap it and fuse it, light the fuse and plug the neck? That devil was lurking just inside. He hasn't gone far. I'll take it down and feed it to him."

"It'll blow in the cave," said Rance.

"And we can find the oysters on the broken ledges. One stick would turn the place inside out. Kill the oysters, maybe, but that won't hurt the pearls, and if we kill that squid we can get 'em."

"Can do, I think," said Wong while Powers protested. Pierce was insistent. Rance and Blimy rowed off in the dinghy to the spit and transferred to the *Elsie's* whaleboat. Powers shook his head and got into his own small boat that he paddled with a short oar,

He seemed to wash his hands of the venture. Farui and the remaining islanders babbled of the folly of trying to kill the great squid. It was a devil, an *aitu*, a god!

Pierce pointed to the severed tentacle ends.

"I got some of that god," he said.

"Next time I get all."

He lay on the float beneath the awning they had rigged, taking it easy. He was sure the cave held treasure trove, and he was sure he could destroy the squid and make the gathering easier. It meant a careful calculation of fuse and no hesitation on his part as he descended. An accident, a slight trip, the tangling of a line and he might be blown to scrap by his own invention.

It was an hour before they came back from the schooner. Wong sat crosslegged smoking his small-bowled pipe, with tobacco, not opium, that he brought to the diving. Pierce, half understanding what they said, heard the *kanakas* discussing him and the devil-with-many-arms, and then dozed off. The boat bumping into the float roused him.

"Wong will fix the bomb," said Rance. "He savvies fuse length better than we do. We'll allow a good margin. You can set the bag inside and make your get-away."

Pierce watched Wong split the greasy stick and set the fulminating cap, to which was attached a short length of the stiff white fuse, well inside the dynamite. He bound the fuse in place, blew air into the bag and saw that all would go inside, finding he had to cut off some of the end of the stick. He tossed the fragment into water and a *cavallo* came up and gobbled it.

POWERS was coming back, rowed by the girl. Pierce saw her glance over her shoulder as they neared the raft. He guessed her errand. Powers thought he was a fool to go down, and perhaps he was, but he was

going to see the thing through. If Powers thought Mary could dissuade him, he was wrong. The boat touched alongside and the girl leaped out. She came straight to Pierce.

"Dad says you're going down," she said. "You're taking risks you have no right to. Suppose something hangs you up? The octopus may be outside, waiting for you."

"I didn't tell him I was coming back."

"There is nothing smart or funny about desperate chances. They'll let you go down because they think they'll get the pearls. Dad and I will touch none of them got that way. It means that Wong can navigate. Can't you see?"

"I can see that squid," said Pierce obstinately. "It's only a fish, or a mollusk with its shell reduced to a cuttle-bone inside of it. Birds sharpen their beaks on it. It hasn't got any brain and I have. I'm going down."

"You're pig-headed as a mule," she cried. Pierce chuckled at her mixed metaphor and she stamped her foot and turned away, tears in her eyes. "Dad," she said, "please stop him."

"Get your helmet on, Jim," said Rance. "We'll light the fuse after you get on the ladder and hand it to you."

Pierce stood on the rungs with arms ready. Wong lit the sputtering fuse and screwed on the cap to the bag. It was a clumsy device at best. Water would cool the rubber, but enough of it might melt to clog the spark. There might not be enough air inside to maintain the fire. And, below, the wounded squid was lurking. It was insensitive, but it must know it was maimed and would automatically seek revenge on whatever came near it.

The bag was hard to handle, unwieldy, as he climbed down and let himself go, landing on the bottom and working back to the cave. Pierce mistrusted the fuse. His safety lay in quick delivery.

There was the opening, and there was the squirming sea brute, its awful eyes glaring, its beak opening, arms stretching out toward him. He could not throw the bag through the fluid, but he caught with one hand at a buttress of coral and swung himself behind it as a tentacle came snaking out toward him.

Then he clawed up and dropped the home-made bomb into the medusa embrace. The tentacles closed in and he jerked his lifeline.

Up he went—and suddenly he was hurled into a ball by concussion of the water as the contrivance exploded prematurely. Wong had guessed wrong—or perhaps right—about the fuse-timing. He went sprawling up, half stunned, in water black as ink from the bursting of the sepia bag.

The sea was still slapping as he crept to the edge of the raft after Farui had removed his helmet. In the turmoil he saw a gray mass, tentacles that were rent, broken, exuding dark blood, twenty feet long, armed with suckers as large as bread plates. He caught a glimpse of two staring eyes and then the bulbous body sank, dragging down the arms.

The *kanakas* were pointing at something else. An enormous fish, floating up with its belly disrupted, great pectorals dragging. It was a *tonu*, dead from the explosion, among scores of smaller fish.

Later they made a legend of how the *tonu* had lived with the squid in the cave, too spiny for the octopus, too large and powerful for him to molest. They made a legend of how *Pierisi* had gone down and slain both of them; and to-day it is still chanted on Paradise to white unbelievers.

The explosion had not demolished the cave as much as they had expected. The living coral was spongy and had resisted demolition. But the roof had fallen in and exposed the interior to the filtering light from the surface. It was a veritable mine of old, sick oy-

sters, and Wong and Pierce worked steadily, day after day, sending up the baskets. There was a tumblerful of pearls by actual measure at the end of a week, steadily augmenting in number. The majority were flawless gems, most of them white, some tinged with yellow and others flushed with pink. Wong brought up a black pear "fancy."

THIERE was hot discussion over the guardianship of the gems. Pierce demanded emphatically that Powers should hold them.

"We know he's honest," he said. "They're counted, anyway."

"He can't very well get far with them," said Rance.

"And we could. He's got to have some assurance we won't sail out on him."

"We'd have to make you navigate at the point of a gun," Rance said, "before you'd leave him—or his daughter—behind."

"I'm not so sure about that," Pierce answered. He looked at Wong as he spoke and thought he saw a glint of mockery in the Chinaman's eyes. Wong was not worrying about their lacking a skipper.

But it was Wong who switched the vote to Pierce's way of thinking. Rance agreed and only Blimy sulked. He was losing steadily to Wong in their nightly bouts, giving chits for the assumed value of his share. Pierce wondered what means Wong would take to be sure of collecting on them.

Rance had taken to *solitaire*, moody of nights, while the Chinaman and the cockney tilted at *vingt-et-un*. Pierce stayed on deck. He did not go ashore. The girl had waited to see he was all right after the killing of the squid, but she had gone away without speaking to him, and he had not seen her since.

Powers was tired after watching the daily fishery, and never came off to the schooner. He mentioned that

changes were taking place on the island. Pierce saw some of them for himself. For two nights the rolling vapor was flecked with fiery comets, and then the crater ceased to emit anything but a dun mist which finally stopped. There were some earth tremors, and Powers reported that the warm sulphur lake was drying up. He thought it was a bad sign.

"The crater is clogged," he said. "I'd suggest you keep ready for sea. We may have to make a hasty exit."

There seemed no immediate cause for alarm. The fertile side of the isle had once been in tumult. The scars were covered now with ash in which the tropic growth flourished. Why not the other half? Pierce considered taking the Elsie outside, mooring with one anchor down and another kedged to the reef, but the others objected strenuously. Inside the reef it was calm, and Blimy was always more or less subject to sea-sickness.

"These things don't go off without plenty of warning," said Rance. "It's not like an active volcano. That's not a true crater, it's only a tufa ring like a big broken mud bubble with hot springs in its throat. It never spouted lava. We'll have the lagoon fairly well cleaned, outside of shell, in another week."

"Wot the 'ell does Powers know about volcanoes?" asked Blimy. "'E's honly lived 'ere a month or so. If the bloody plyce is going to blow up, hall the more reason why we should clean hout the lagoon. We may not get a chance to come back."

Considering that he had done none of the work, just like Rance, Pierce thought his "we's" were nervy.

The cave was thoroughly prospected by now, and they had gone farther afield. Pierce came across a deep rift in the floor of the lagoon whose depth he could not guess, but which suggested an unfathomable abyss. It crossed the bottom and made a natural division that could not be crossed save by float-

ing the raft beyond it. On the far side they found no pearls at all. But the oysters along the rim of the gulf were fairly prolific.

Judgment was hard below fifteen fathoms in the purplish twilight, sight deceptive with the movement of water and the continual waving of weeds, but Pierce began to be certain that the rift was widening slowly, if not deepening. He asked Wong about it, and Wong suggested he was mistaken. But one day Pierce felt water welling up from the deep cañon that was distinctly hot. That night the level of the lagoon had risen so that it overflowed the sand spit to the outer lagoon at ebb.

He talked to Powers about it. He would have liked to go up to his camp, but he thought Mary Powers might fancy he was making an excuse to see her, and he was not going to knuckle down to any girl, even if he was in love with her.

Powers was anxious.

"I've noticed it," he said. "We ought to get away. Personally, I don't want any question of more pearls to endanger the life of my girl. There are plenty for our share. Mary has been over to the north end and all the mushroom craters and smokeholes have vanished. The lake's dry as a bone. The conditions are much the same as in New Zealand before the Terraces were destroyed. But we are in your hands." —

"I'd quit in a jiffy," said Pierce. "Wong can't see that as long as he can gather oysters. We're still getting pearls, as you know."

CHAPTER VIII.

PIRACY.

THAT night Pierce woke to the sound of grinding earth and rock, of tumbling stone. The schooner heaved up on a great swell until her cable brought her up short where she

swung to the tide. It almost took the bitts out of her. For awhile the outer lagoon was a maelstrom, the sea outside gone wild, but it subsided at last, and there was no more trouble.

Dawn showed that there had been enough. The great mass of the mesa was rent in half. The crater dome was broken. The inner lagoon had stopped rising and was slowly ebbing instead—while the tide was at flood.

Wong agreed there should be no diving that day. The pump needed repacking, and Farui started to work on it. Rance suggested a walk to the north end, and Pierce was willing enough to go. Wong and Blimy got out the cards.

Save for obviously fresh fractures of rock and piles of stones newly assembled, nothing seemed especially ominous. There were no more quakes, great or small. Where the grass-green lake had been there was only a basin of yellowish sulphates, cracked in all directions. There was the sickly-sweet smell and taste of chlorine gas in the air, but it was not enough to bother them.

The new cleft in the mesa had split it from top to bottom, revealing its curious structure. The rock looked like petrified, magnified sponge.

"Looks as if it was all over," said Rance. "It was a nasty one while it lasted."

Pierce pointed out to sea. Beyond the cape where the gannets flocked there were new reefs, tumbling water where the rollers broke heavily. He saw other places where the coral had lifted.

"We'll have to be careful getting out," he said. "And, look, Rance! There isn't a bird in sight. They've quit the island."

It was true. The rookery was utterly deserted, save for eggs and fledglings. The whole place seemed strangely silent, lacking their cries, lacking the blow off of the crater. There was only the boom of the surf.

"The whole thing is a bit creepy," said Rance. "I've had a feeling all morning as if some one was walking over my grave. Let's get back. I'll vote to make a move, Pierce, if you suggest it. There were only two pearls yesterday."

"It suits me," Pierce answered. As they went back toward the lagoon he was conscious that Rance was regarding him speculatively, with a look in his eyes that was not pleasant. He talked occasionally, but it was as if the man himself had retreated to some recess in his mind where he was planning secret matters, while his voice spoke automatically.

It was coming to a show-down.

They came on what had been the lagoon. It was empty. The coral bottom showed with pools here and there, fish caught in the coral, weeds lying flat. Their iodine smell blended with something stronger: sulphur, chlorine. The gulf in the center lay like a grinning mouth. The water had drained down it, carrying with it much of what had lived there. The raft lay stranded on the floor. The steep slopes pitched down to it unchanged.

"My God!" said Rance. "It's time to go, Pierce. Time to get away from here."

They saw Farui and the two men he had had with him. The lagoon had suddenly commenced to swirl and eddy while they were working on the pump. The raft was moored, unwieldy, and they had dived over and swum for shore, struggling against the tug of the disappearing water and barely making land.

Powers and his daughter had shown on the cliff, and Powers had called down that he would meet them on the beach. So far he had not arrived. It was a difficult climb down by way of the fall and pool where Pierce had talked with Mary. Difficult for a man whose lungs had been crimped by gas and whose wind was faulty. Powers was indubitably better, but he was

still weak. Not in very good shape to help Pierce put up a fight; and Pierce felt certain that a fight was coming.

For the time the thought of it was banished by the phenomenon of the lagoon. That had happened without noise, without steam. The gulf had opened under the water and sucked it down. It had not closed again, but showed in that devilish suggestion of a grin. All about them the surf pounded in their ears. The noise of it seemed to fill the air with vibration, to come from all directions. It was the voice of the sea, menacing. It seemed to claim the island for its own.

Pierce caught sight of Powers and his daughter coming round the promontory from a little bay. They were loaded down, walking slowly.

"I hope they brought the pearls with them," said Rance. His tone was dry, his eyes glittering, his lips drawn back to show teeth and gums.

It seemed somehow as if the place was hushed to listen to the thunder of the surf, as if the island had surrendered and was waiting to be taken over, received back into the ocean. That was just fantasy, but Pierce felt it, despite a stronger emotion, a hunch born of Rance's attitude.

"I'll go and help them," he said. "They're loaded down."

"You stay with me," said Rance with a snarl. "You and I have been in this thing from the start, Jim. I'd like you to keep in on it. But you want to play along with me."

Rance wore his gun in a hip holster. He had thrust his hand partly into his pants pocket, thumb outside, close to the butt of the gun. Pierce's weapon was under his coat. He had worn it pretty constantly, except when he was diving. His eyes narrowed. His hand crept upward. Rance laughed.

"Don't get tragic, Pierce. It may not come to that, if folks are reasonable. There is more than one angle to this."

There was a commotion of sound and action broken out on the Elsie. The crew left aboard were yelling and gesticulating.

"Something gone wrong," said Rance. "Farui, you tell Mr. Powers we'll be back for him. Come along, Jim. I wouldn't wonder but what there's been trouble at last between Wong and Blimy."

There was a note in his voice curiously like satisfaction as they went off in the dinghy. A clever man, Rance, now that he was aroused from the slump he had taken on Paradise. A man with a brain that calculated moves on both sides and played chess with the opposition in a law case, he had used the best that was left in him in this deal.

Cleverer than Wong. If Wong and Blimy had got into the row that had plainly ended seriously, it was not because of any especial contriving of Rance. Wong himself had provoked it with devilish premeditation. He had amused himself with Blimy. Lately he had let him win, Pierce thought, for the sheer pleasure of passing the time agreeably, practicing his skill and watching Blimy glow at the hope of recouping his losses, followed by gloom as once more he signed chits.

There was little left to him of his share of the pearls, Pierce knew.

If there had been a fracas Wong would have been prepared for it, come out on top. Pierce believed Rance figured the same way. Rance had let the two play out their own side bets, sure that ultimately Blimy would lose his temper, realizing that it was still his ship on which they were sailing back, with him a pauper as far as the pearls went.

The *kanakas* were jabbering. Pierce caught the drift of their talk. Wong and Blimy—*Bilaimi*, as they called him—both dead?

It was not quite the truth. Blimy was not gone. He was going. Shot just above the heart, crimson froth coming

from his lips with little gushes of scarlet. He was bleeding internally. His face was ghastly with a mottle of white and red and blue, paling into neutrality.

Wong's body sat on the floor across the table. His chair was knocked over. There was a bruise on his forehead, with a cut in the middle of it. His jugular had been slashed, his clothes were saturated. The place was a shambles, smelling of blood, flies buzzing about. There was a broken bottle of squareface on the floor of the cabin. Two more empties were on the table among the cards and chips, spotted with blood that had spurted from Wong's severed throat. A knife—Blimy's knife—stained horribly.

Rance gave Blimy a drink after they had lifted him. The face of the ex-lawyer was set in a quizzical mask. If he had hoped to reduce sharers he had succeeded beyond his expectations. There was no hope for Blimy. Rance gave him some gin and water, while Pierce wiped off his lips.

"I caught 'im," gasped Blimy. "Thought I would, sooner or later. Bilkin' me. Got a five out of 'is sleeve. 'Ad 'is gun there too. Mine was in my room. But I 'ad my toad-sticker. He missed my 'eart. Got me all right—but I got 'im. I caught 'im over the 'ead with the bottle and I cut 'is yellow throat fer 'im before I flopped. I'd 'ave gutted 'im like a 'erring if I'd 'ad the strength. 'E's dead, hain't he?"

Rance nodded.

"You did him in, Blimy."

"Blarst 'im! 'Elped you out, too, Rance, didn't I? Two of us—out of the w'y—out of the w'y—for keeps. Suits your book. Pierce—you there? Pierce, you look hout—look hout—for—"

"H E'S gone, Jim," said Rance. "Another share apiece for you and me. Or you can make your girl a present of yours. Better not let her come off until we get this cleared

up a bit. I'll have the *kanakas* fix it up. You'll have to tell them what happened. Bring them off in half an hour—and be sure they've got the pearls with them. We can get out this afternoon, can't we?"

"On the ebb, an hour before sunset." Pierce spoke tersely. Rance was a callous devil. He was inwardly chuckling and gloating now over the death of Wong and Blimy, counting it only as two more shares. But now Pierce had only the one man to handle. He was not afraid for the sick man or the girl. Rance would see that and make the best of it, probably had decided to with diabolical foresight. The thing now was to get away. There was water to be taken on, fresh fruit and nuts. The raft and pump, with the other diving gear, could stay where they were at the bottom of the dry lagoon. Pearls there too, in shell that would rot itself out.

He broke the news to Powers and his daughter, who listened with grave faces. The girl took it well. Powers nodded as if he was little surprised. But he made no comment. It was not a time for talk.

"I'm glad we're getting away," he said. "The cliff's sliding. There's a crack in it, and there are fissures other places. That's why we were so long coming down."

The girl sat apart and Pierce left her alone until after he had sent Farui off to see if the cabin had been cleared up and the bodies removed. They would bury them later, at sea, sewed up in some of Wong's spare canvas, weighted by the extra lead carried for the diving gear.

Farui brought back men to get the water and fruit.

"All right along *ehipe*"—ship—he reported. "'Thi s *motu*"—island—"no good. Too much devil-devil along this place."

"I agree with you, Farui." Pierce went to the girl.

"We're ready to go now," he said.

She looked at him with a set chin, but a voice that quavered a little.

"It's a rotten hole," she said. "I thought it was beautiful once; part of it, at least. Oh, let's go! O. K., dad?"

Rance was not visible. The cabin had been fixed up. No trace of the double crime was visible. Nor did they see Rance again until after they got away, heading out through the reef gate, carefully avoiding the new ledges, clear at last, the island with the rent mesa, the broken crater bowl, distinct in the amber light.

Mary Powers had volunteered to cook. She was in the galley when Powers caught his arm.

"She's going, Pierce. We're away just in time. She's crumpling. Look at that."

There was a shaft of sepia vapor rushing up from the bowl, high into the air, spreading out like a tree, soundless save for the gush of steam that came with it. Then they saw a vivid streak of red-hot lava creeping over the side. They saw the ravine cliffs of the lagoon closing up like the tops of great shears. The mesa was rocking, toppling. Trees wavered and slid down the ridge. Now sound came to them, though the beat of the surf, grating, roaring, grinding noises as the island changed shape.

"She may not go down," said Powers. "I think she's rising. There'll be more sulphur deposits later on, but no one will get any more shell or pearls out of that lagoon."

They stood watching, the three of them along with the *kanakas*, supper disregarded, until night shut down and all they could see was a pulsing glow that presently faded below the horizon as the Elsie ran before the trade. Rance did not appear.

The next day he came out with an absent manner, infinitely polite, refusing to eat, his eyes glazed. He had got at Wong's supply of opium and had overindulged in the drug. He came out of its influence later in the

afternoon as the fresh wind helped to offset the opiate.

"It seems we win, Pierce," he said. "Just four of us in the final split, after all. It's the way the little gods deal the cards. I'm lucky to be in on it. And so are you."

"Why?"

"Because—" That sentence was never finished. A *kanaka* had shouted. There was a sail in sight, a schooner coming up close-hauled, well to windward.

Powers had binoculars and had brought them aboard. Rance fairly snatched them from him, focused them on the other vessel.

"YARDLEIGH!" he said. "It's the Southern Belle all right.

That unscrupulous devil! Now how—Boozy Farrell, sore because we wouldn't take him on—and that half-breed Joni! Jim, I'll bet it was Boozy set that son of his to steal that log from you. That didn't work, and then Joni shipped aboard us. Remember the row on deck when we were marking off the position? Joni heard us read that slip of yours, then swam back to shore. When Yardleigh landed at Paradise, Boozy went in with him. The Southern Belle can sail rings round this barge. We haven't got a chance. Yardleigh and his crew of black islanders! He's got a rack of rifles on board and we've only two, with three or four pistols."

Pierce gazed out to sea. Powers was a far better skipper than himself, though hardly strong enough for the command as yet.

"Do you think we can hold them off until dark, sir?" Pierce asked.

Powers shook his head, his lined face grave and anxious.

"I know something of Yardleigh," he said. "Likely to stick at nothing. Mary, get below before you're seen. Quickly."

She obeyed silently.

"They don't know she's aboard,"

Powers went on. "If they did— They may be content with the pearls. That's all they know about. As long as they don't search the ship."

"They won't touch Mary," said Pierce.

"Not while you and I are alive, my boy. I don't know about Rance. He's pretty desperate. Lost his last throw."

The Southern Belle came racing through the seas, lee rail under, pointing high. They got up what weapons they had. Rance said Yardleigh had always a crew of twelve.

"He'd make us all walk the plank for a twentieth of what we've got," Rance insisted. "He won't take our word for what we hand over, either. He'll go through the ship. No chance to hide anything. But I'm not done yet. There he comes about."

Rance's pupils were still dilated. But now the opium left in his system seemed to stimulate him. They watched the other schooner, leaping toward them. She would cross their bows easily.

When she did, Rance swung on his heels and shook his fist at her. It seemed a foolish gesture. Pierce thought only of the peril to the girl. With the pearls his, Yardleigh could afford to throw away all his trading ventures. How would he react to Mary Powers? Her father evidently feared the worst.

The Southern Belle came lunging past them, a biscuit-toss away. A big, bearded man stood aft and roared at them:

"Heave to. I'm boardin' you. Tried to hog it, did you, Rance? Heave to!"

Pierce had rigged the staysail out to port. He had had a spare made on the island and he set this on a boom and used it as spinnaker. They might outrun them. The Elsie, down by the head because of the extra canvas on the fore, plowed along. The Southern Belle tacked again and came racing after them, wing and wing, making three knots to their clumsy two.

As she ranged alongside two rifles cracked. The man at the Elsie's wheel fell with a bullet in his brain. The schooner yawed, fell off. Pierce sprang for the spokes.

"Heave to, or we'll kill every one of ye!" came the deep bellow.

"Pick him off, Rance," Pierce shouted. "If we can get him—" A slug crashed into Pierce's shoulder and he went down. Powers took his place, giving the reluctant order to come into the wind.

They hung there rocking while the Southern Belle made the same maneuver. A boat was launched from her and six black men with rifles as well as their oars dropped into her. Yardleigh had the steering sweep, and beside him was Boozy Farrell.

Rance had gone below. The boat was almost alongside when he reappeared smoking a cigar vigorously. The wind fanned the spark of it. He stood at the rail and Yardleigh yelled at him some word of derision that suddenly changed his note. Boozy was standing up, squeaking in terror.

Rance had a full stick of dynamite in his hand, short of fuse, a match-head thrust into where he had split it with his knife.

He flung it just as Yardleigh fired. Rance had caught the mainstays and stood on the rail for a better throw. He pitched forward into the sea, dead.

A man in the boat struck at the fizing stick with an oar in his frenzy. It might have made small difference, but he missed it and the bomb fell fairly in the middle of them. There was a burst of flame, a crashing detonation beneath a pall of yellow smoke, and the boat fell apart, foundering, men with the lives rent out of them going down, struggling a little, vanishing.

There was no aid for them. Already the fins of sharks that had been trailing both vessels cut the water, disappeared as they sought their feast. Powers put the helm over while the Elsie's crew obeyed his hoarse order.

Once more they were before the wind and they were not followed. The Southern Belle, with what was left of her complement, swung off, her survivors dazed at the catastrophe.

PIERCE'S shoulder was mending nicely before they sighted Tahiti. but Powers—and Mary, acting nurse—insisted that he stay in his berth until they dropped anchor.

The Elsie was going nicely, for her, through a calm sea, at daybreak, when the pinnacles of Eimeo lifted. The dim, lofty outlines of Tahiti, wrapped in veils of mist, rose from the sea.

Powers sent Farui to awaken Mary. She busied herself with the final breakfast on board and Farui took the wheel.

After she and her father had eaten, she fixed a tray to take in to Pierce. They were off the pass now. The masts of the trading schooners of Papeete were visible, the warehouses and sheds, the narrow streets running inland, the rugged mountains, verdant, cleft by Fautaua Gorge.

Powers got up to take the deck. He was feeling almost his old self again. The door of Pierce's room was open. He heard the murmur of voices. With a smile he stopped to listen, not to

eavesdrop. He knew by now how things stood between the two, and was content. It was Mary's affair. They had made no announcement. Powers fancied the affair had not quite come to a head. It seemed to be close to it now.

"You understand," Mary was saying, "that you must never take such desperate chances again. Never! To go down after that squid—it was silly!"

"There have been other chances just as desperate," said Pierce. "There may be more. I'm not going to make any promises like that, Mary. We'll play the game together, but I'm judging my own hand."

"I hate you. You belong to me. Or you said you did. It's off. Let me alone—I hate you!"

Powers did not seem to take the declaration seriously. He chuckled. There was silence inside the room. Then the door softly closed. Powers tiptoed away.

"If he doesn't weaken, they'll get along first rate," Powers smiled. "Mary's a good deal like her mother—and a lot of other women. It's boss or be bossed with them, and they like the latter best."

THE END.



An Iceberg in an Oil Field

SUBZERO weather sweeps down to silence the flow of the tumbling waters of Niagara Falls and creates a suspended and jumbled mass of icicles; but, recently, when a huge "gasser" was struck in the Medicine Hat oil fields of Alberta under the same weather conditions, the result was a miniature iceberg—an inverted icicle.

This inverted icicle, about fifty feet in diameter at the base, suddenly came into existence by the congealing of the moisture sprayed over the derrick from the pressure of twenty million cubic feet of gas daily.

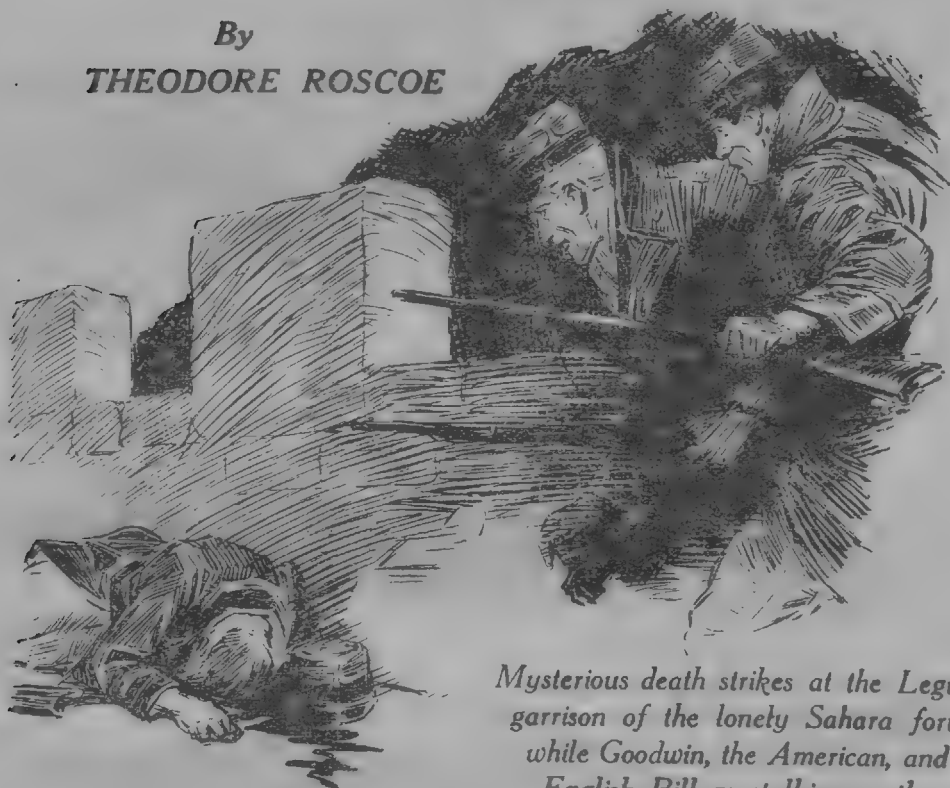
The rig sealed and left only the crown block visible. The operators were compelled to use high-pressure steam lines to cut a hole large enough to permit the crew to cap the gasser. The next step is to melt the ice enshrouding the derrick. If the ice were permitted to melt in the spring it might thaw unevenly and carry the rig to earth.

Emery L. Salomon.

Phantom Bullets

By

THEODORE ROSCOE



"John! He was shot while
we stood talkin' here!"

*Mysterious death strikes at the Legion
garrison of the lonely Sahara fort,
while Goodwin, the American, and
English Bill go stalking on the
ghostly, moonlit desert*

DOWN in the desert an Arab was killed. Dawn was painting a mauve pool between craggy peaks that jutted where the sun would rise, when the bullet took the Arab squarely behind the left ear. The Arab's pink tongue poked from his beard. He spun around in his path, stumbled, spraddled flat in the sand. Blood squirted from the hole in his skull; and before the echo of the shot had wandered away he was dead.

Now this Arab had been guilty of nothing save the sin of appearing on the right scene at the right time. Otherwise he had been the most innocent of innocent bystanders, bent on nothing more than locating a flock of mangy

goats that meandered from his camp during the night. In point of fact he had just finished scratching at a peculiarly persistent flea that had been burrowing in his smelly clothing, and was about to remove his sandals to start his morning bows to Allah when the bullet smashed into his head. He never knew what struck him. He never knew that he died for the honor of France.

And this was the way of it:

CAFARD is one of the deadly enemies of the Foreign Legion. A sort of madness it is; a brand of insanity bred by drudgery, bad food, heat and other unpleasantnesses suf-

fered by men shut away from the world in some desert outpost long since forgotten by God, Allah and the War Department in Paris. Perhaps the chief cause of the madness is monotony—the awful sameness of the drill, the invariable faces across the mess table, the lonely, endless reaches of eye-blinding sand. For life in a Legion outpost is seldom the romantic, battling, Tricolor-waving existence led by the Foreign Legions of Hollywood and the best sellers. It is a life of peeling onions, scrubbing floors, furbishing gear, saluting, marching on hot drill grounds, digging latrines. A humdrum, hard-working, monotonous soldier life.

Perhaps the only thing to break this monotony is the *cafard* itself. The strange disorder manifests itself in peculiar ways. Usually its victims go for a *promenade*, and, deserting, are found rotten on the desert where thirst or the sun has brought them down. Sometimes they run amuck, stabbing or shooting one of their fellows. Sometimes they go about mumbling to themselves. Or they may go raving mad, trying to incite mutiny, murder, or wholesale suicides. A sinister thing, *cafard*, and feared by those who knew it. Colonel Thibaut Meilhac, for example, was afraid of it.

Colonel Thibaut Meilhac commanded the garrison at Fort Avant-poste. Certainly Fort Avant-poste, squatting in utter solitude on that desolate corner of the Sahara, was the dreariest, most cheerless spot in Allah's world. Once a Touareg stronghold, the place had been captured and de-loused by the soldiers of France; changed into a cluster of brown plaster houses set in the middle of a brown drill ground surrounded by a brown plaster wall. So the fort was baked and brown, and its surrounding landscape was baked and brown. Southward, westward, northward, stretched a sandy monotone—a naked waste, quiet as the graves of its dead Touareg defenders, hot as the hell whither they had gone.

Only to eastward was the skyline cleft by a lift of mountainland. On this side of the fort the desert gave rise to ragged, rusty-colored hills knifed through by dry watercourses and boulder-strewn cañons. Thirsty palm groves shadowed the dust at the mouth of several cañons. There one might see a straggling camel caravan or a shabby group of nomad goat-herds to remind that there were other humans in the world.

A forlorn place, then, Fort Avant-poste and its landscape. The Arabs claimed Allah made that landscape in a fit of anger.

The Legionnaires claimed the Arabs were right. More: they believed that Allah had cast a curse upon the outpost; the fort was haunted. Had not, during the last six months, five of their number been shot and killed while mounting guard? Phantom bullets, those! The victims had fallen with lead in their skulls when never a shot was heard nor gunner seen. One had been killed in April, one in June, three in the past week of July.

Interest in this ghost story, and the kindly hand of Colonel Meilhac, the post commander, were the main factors in keeping the Legionnaires of the God-lost garrison from going *cafard*, and making of the fort a charnel house. If the mysterious killings were a bad antidote, Colonel Meilhac was a good one. Thibaut Meilhac was a veteran warrior and handler of men. Long a member of France's illustrious Legion of Honor, he had served with the Foreign Legion in almost every cranny of the republic's farflung border line. He had served from Indo-China to Syria. From Madagascar to Somaliland. He had served France, and he had served his men.

Nobody could guess the old soldier's age. The weepy mustaches above his kindly mouth were white as snow. The brows above the twinkly eyes with the nests of humorous wrinkles in the corners were white as cotton and as thick.

Wisps of hair straying across his forehead became strands of silver against the leathery skin. He must have been sixty and he might have been a hundred. If he had been a hundred, he owned a medal for every year of his life and a friend for every day.

Soldiers loved him and died grinning for Colonel Meilhac. From bel-Abbes to Tonkin he was the hero of many a gallant story, and the men of his company knew him only as "Father Thibaut." He was that kind of man. The kind of man, they said, who was so devoted to his troops he was lenient; so lenient he never could be military enough to become a marshal of France. Strict? *Mais oui!* What officer of the Legion is not strict? But always he had been justice itself. And justice was as rare in the Legion as in any other portion of man's world. And Colonel Meilhac was kind in a rare way, too, and brave. He had been brave enough to retreat against orders to save his company from useless annihilation. He had been known to give the last water-drop from his canteen to a dying legionnaire, one who had once sworn to cut his liver out. That was in a Dahomey jungle; and the tale had lasted thirty years.

Possibly the greatest compliment paid his powers as a leader of men lay in the fact that during his twenty months as commandant at Fort Avant-poste there had been no attempts at desertion.

"But this is because I have striven to combat *cafard*," he told a commissioner who had dropped off for a two-day visit late that July. "I keep my men amused. In all my years of command, as God well knows, I have never ridden my men. They box in the barracks every night, play games, enjoy athletics. My officers are never permitted to abuse. I do not drill the recruits to death. Keep them interested—that is the way to prevent *cafard*. If their minds are occupied they do not go stale and mad. But, *Sacré Nom de*

Dieu! They have had more than enough to occupy their minds of late, and so have I! Name of St. Anthony! Something terrible and strange has begun to happen here of late, and the good God knows what I shall write in my reports. I am an old man and do not believe in ghosts and phantoms, but— No shot was heard! No enemy seen! Yet something, some one has been shooting down my sentinels! One was killed in April, one in June. And, name of a name of a name! Three last week!"

MIDNIGHT moonray shed spectral shadows down the dunes; tipped the crags that marched the eastern horizon with delicate silver. Emblem of the Moslem world it lighted, the moon cruised low, blown by chill night winds. Out where the palm trees spread black pompoms toward the stars, a jackal mourned doleful threnody. The wail but served to emphasize the quiet; failed to disturb the vast sand meadow in its dream. The desert slept.

Legionnaire of the first class, John Goodwin did not sleep. The gaunt, hard American with the hard, gaunt face made friendly by the easy blue eyes was very much awake. Mounting guard, of late, had become a spine-tickling business. Years of bucking an unfriendly world on its unfriendliest frontiers had left little of fear in the American's soul, but he had been a navy man before renting his life to France and the spines of sailors are apt to tickle where superstitions are involved. Superstition had laid its clammy hand on Fort Avant-poste these last few weeks.

"I ain't a man who believes in ghosts an' such," John Goodwin had confided to his buddy, English Bill, that afternoon in the barracks. "But wasn't I mountin' guard last week when that last killin' was pulled off? Here was the big Russian patrollin' the wall as nice as you please. Suddenly he keels over with a bloody face same

as them others did. Shot square between the eyes. I glare out across the desert, but there ain't a sound or soul to be seen. An' if a phantom bullet, like these Frenchies call it, didn't knock that big Slav off, I'm triple-damned if I know what did!"

Nobody knew what did. The legionnaires had been roused from their cots and scattered out across the sands to hunt for—what? Not a foot track had been discovered within a radius of five miles of the fort. The nearest Arab had been located at a palm grove eight miles eastward.

"That's th' fifth one been popped off, Bill," the American had reminded his friend. "An' I'm mountin' guard again to-night. So are you. Lemme tell you, buddy, we better step around sharp. I'm keepin' wide awake!"

He was. So was his buddy, English Bill; and so were the other sentinels. Ordinarily there were only two on the sentry detail, but to-night, in view of the mysterious episodes enacted the previous week, the commandant had posted four. Two of these men remained stationary at the center of the east and west walls. Marching down the firing-step, the mobile sentries reported to the stationary men at regular intervals.

John Goodwin, a mobile sentinel, marched the firing-step along the wall. This wall came only shoulder-high, and despite himself the American legionnaire suffered a continual desire to get his head and shoulders out of the way. Yet, he really did not believe in ghosts. To north, south and west the desert lay smooth as a floor. No living thing was there. There were boulders and rocks within gunshot eastward, but to be attained by an enemy open reaches of sand would have to be crossed, and only jackals had crossed them. What enemy, then, could strike him down?

Patrolling the opposite section of wall, English Bill reported nothing stirring. So did the stationary sentry at the middle of the west wall, a ratty

little Frenchman named Proust. The same report was given by the Swiss legionnaire, one Emil Stehli, posted on the east wall. "All well?" the mobile sentries would ask. "Anything to report?" and invariably they would get the same reply. "Nothing!"

"It's mighty queer," Goodwin muttered to English Bill when they paced up to the Swiss guard for the eighth time after midnight. "That Russian was killed last week on just such a night as this. Moonlight. Nothin' stirrin' across th' sand. Quiet as a tomb. Gives me th' creeps to think about it. I was alone with him, that night. Say, I'm mighty glad Father Thibaut posted four of us to-night."

WHEN he mentioned the name of Colonel Meilhac, the American's voice was reverent. Eight years John Goodwin had spent in the Legion, and always in the company of the old French soldier. English Bill, too, had put in a similar time with the company. He spoke, too, reverently of the old commander. A character, this English Bill. Signed on the Legion rôles as Bill Breck, but known to certain forgotten clubs in London as Tracy DeForest, disappeared. Somewhere his life had snarled; and he had cut the knot by joining the Legion and teaching hands schooled for a surgeon's scalpel to wield a paring knife and Lebel gun. Three boasts he would make from a thin-lipped, sardonic mouth. One of them was that he knew Colonel Meilhac. One of them was that he was John Goodwin's buddy. One of them was that he was the only soldier in the French Foreign Legion to wear a monocle.

Now, as he stood on the firing-step beside the American, he drew the disk of glass from the bosom of his *capote*, and flipped it into his eye. The monocle glistened where it caught a moonbeam straying beneath the visor of his *kepi*. The gaunt American hitched his rifle; grunted.

"Look here, Bill. I'd take that damn fool trinket outa my face if I was you. You can't never tell. Even a phantom may have to draw a bead on somethin', an' you might get plugged square in the eye. Say, what are you starin' at, anyhow?"

English Bill was frowning. At Goodwin's query he flourished a slim hand to indicate the Swiss legionnaire, Stehli, who stood at the wall some four feet away. The American glared. The Swiss was leaning against the wall, staring fixedly out across the barren sand, and teetering ever so slightly on his toes. English Bill screwed his monocle a half turn; coughed. As he did so, the little Swiss let fall his rifle; swung around with an uncertain gesture. A split-minute tick he stood there, smiling. Then a fount of blood spouted from a hole in the middle of his forehead, and he collapsed on his face like an emptied balloon.

Blood splattered over Goodwin's shoes, and he jumped as if he had been kicked. English Bill's voice came from away off somewhere. "My God, John! He was shot while we stood talkin' here! Been dead on his feet for th' last two minutes! Where th' bloody hell—"

A tear of sweat sprang down Goodwin's lean nose. English Bill swung his Lebel rifle at the moon, and let go. The explosion clamored off across the sands and clattered faintly against the distant eastern cliffs. Hopping over the corpse at his feet, Goodwin started down the firing-step, yelling hoarsely for the remaining sentry, Proust.

But the sound of the signal gun and the shouts of the American did not arouse the sentry named Proust. A thousand cannons and a million shouting Yankees could not have roused him. Rounding a corner of the wall, Goodwin saw the ratty little French sentry squatting down on the firing-step as if asleep. His rifle lay across his bony knees, his chin lay on his chest.

The man was grinning, but Goodwin squawked when he saw that face. The lips were drawn, the eyes were popping, and from ear to chin the throat was enameled red by the blood that bubbled from the nape of the neck and gushed around the collar of the overcoat.

"Dead! Shot through the back of the neck! Deader'n hell!"

Whispering queer words, the American leaned a gaunt, sick body against the wall; wiped water from his cheeks. Out across the parade ground the barrack buildings showed patches of canary-yellow light and shouted with growing commotion. But out across the desert where the moonlight lay, not a movement disturbed the dream.

A WAVE of consternation broke over Fort Avant-poste with the news of the latest killings. Officers and men alike were baffled, uneasy, scared. Headquarters staged thorough grillings. Search parties raked across the desert and found nothing but a few strayed goats. The legionnaires looked at one another; swore. One cannot trace phantoms!

The little community of forty men, isolated from a world of modern things, fell back upon speculations out of the Dark Ages when confronted by mystery and the unknown. Gossip of ghosts, phantoms, voodooes, evil eye, witch-curses, banshees, demons and werewolves occupied every tongue.

Embellishments were added. A Bavarian in the company claimed he had seen three ghost horsemen riding away in the night just after the first man was killed in April. A fat little Dane claimed an Arab in Oran had told him he would find the fort accursed, placed under an evil spell by the souls of the dead Touaregs from whom it had been wrenched. Most of the French legionnaires were inclined to believe that some Arab *jinni* was haunting the place, revenging the French occupation.

"But I," claimed English Bill to his buddy, John Goodwin, when they were alone together in the barracks, "don't believe a word of this bally tommyrot about ghosts and what-not. Have some of this rotten red wine, John, my boy, and listen to me. I don't believe in these bloody ghost yarns!"

It was torrid mid afternoon. The two legionnaires, just come from the rigors of a military funeral, sat bared to the waist after a stifling full-dress parade. Goodwin, the American, tossed down his wine with a grunt.

"I certainly believe them lads were killed las' night," he declared, "after the funeral we give 'em this noon. Sun 'most took my head off, an' I began to realize them' boys lyin' in their flags was dead after all. Whew! Hope no more of 'em gets dropped durin' this hot spell, that's a fact." He laughed uneasily. "For awhile I couldn't believe they was dead last night. Couldn't believe it till we buried 'em to-day. An' say, a royal buryin' the old colonel gave 'em, didn't he? You'd have thought they was heroes. An' there was Father Thibaut in his full dress uniform havin' us fire salutes, an' all. The colonel looked pretty upset, didn't he? Thought he might keel over when he gave us that speech, standin' there in full outfit loaded down with his decorations an' medals. Boys sure gave him a big cheer after for his talk when he told 'em to keep up nerve. But he looked kinda shaky when he mentioned the killings, eh? Reckon he don't know quite how to handle the affair, no more than the rest of us. An' if you don't believe in ghosts, English Bill, what the almighty hell do you think has been knockin' off these men?"

The Englishman licked a film of sweat from his upper lip. "I know what's been knocking them off," he declared. "A bullet fired from a rifle, that's what. But the way of it I can't say just yet."

Fumbling at his blue sash, he extracted his monocle and flickered it

into his eye. *Kepi* tilted on the back of his yellow head, thumbs thrust into the sash, he leaned back in his chair and watched a lizard scoot down the ceiling. When he leaned forward again it was with a queer exclamation. Goodwin, who had been engaged in rolling a cheap rice-paper cigarette, looked up in surprise.

"Yankee!" English Bill demanded, "you don't believe in phantom bullets and ghost marksmen, either. Come out of it, old man. These murders can be explained. That's what they are—murders. Now there haven't been any murderers seen, have there? Nor shots heard fired? Not a bally one. But—by Jove, old chap, I've got an idea. Put two an' two together, that's all."

Muttering an oath, the American ex-sailor grabbed his friend's bare arm. "Out with it, Bill! You got a clew to this doggone business—"

"All I've got," explained the Englishman, rising from his chair, "is to go an' get dressed for th' bleedin' afternoon drill. But, John!" He lowered his voice, leaned down to squeeze the American's wrist. "You and me are going to investigate, old man. Talkin' here has handed me an idea. Tell you later. We're goin' to jump barracks after taps to-night, anyway. You'll see, old man. Two an' two make four, even on the Sahara."

"Two an' two make four? You ain't gone *cafard*, have you, Bill?"

"You'll see, old chap. I got some things to look into this afternoon. Hmmm. By Jove! Listen, Yankee, didn't this bloody fort use to be a Touareg stronghold? Gad, I thought so! Fits in! I say! I'll be right off, John. See you later. Don't forget about to-night."

JOHN GOODWIN was astonished when his buddy, English Bill, found the door. It was dark with moonlight around there behind the ammunition sheds and the cook house. The Englishman had been fumbling

along a section of low plaster wall that sheltered the refuse cans of the kitchen. A thick wall it was, a remnant of the foundations of the original Touareg fort, left standing in case it might be handy as a rampart should an enemy smash the outpost gates. English Bill had sneaked along the wall, tapping at random with the butt of his heavy blue-steel service automatic. And the improbable had happened! A three-foot square of plaster had swung inward with a gentle sigh. A yawning hole exhaled a dank breath. There, in the center of the strip of thick wall, opened a door!

Goodwin, still sleepy from his recent desertion of a barrack bed, stared with jaw dropping in amazement. But English Bill did not seem so surprised. Fastening monocle to eye, he surveyed the aperture his gun had opened with a casual nod.

"There you are, Yank!" he whispered. "Two an' two make four. Here it is. I figured something of the sort. Used to read Sherlock Holmes in my day, an' it's helped. Get your automatic out, old man. We may bloody well need it. An' be quick. We're goin' through this door. Come on before that sentry gets around this way. Into the wall!"

Tugging his *kepi* over his eyes, the English legionnaire ducked into the black square gaping in the wall. Swearing under his breath, Goodwin yanked his ponderous automatic and followed suit. It was cool in the wall, but oppressive with stale air, and tar-black. Where the soldiers crouched there was scarcely room for two to squeeze. English Bill told Goodwin to hunch past him and close the door. The plaster square swung to, and the men were locked in a packed blackness. English Bill was chuckling. Goodwin heard him fumbling about, saw a match flutter in his fingers. Weak yellow light scattered the dark, and, to the American's further astonishment, he saw they were crouching

at the top of a crude plaster stairway that tunneled an easy descent into the earth.

English Bill held high the flickering match, nodding.

"Arabian nights," was his laconic comment. "I expected it."

Goodwin relieved himself of a pungent curse. His eyes were wide in his sweat-wet face, and he snatched his companion's sleeve. "What's all this mean, English Bill? When'd you find this here tunnel? Come through, Bill. How'd you get on to this here, an' where does it go?"

The Englishman lit another match. The wiggling flame made of the glass disk beneath his visor an ogling, shiny moon. "Where does it go? God alone knows, Yankee, but I can guess. It's goin' to lead into a bloody beastly surprise, an' I can tell you that. How did I find it? Pure mathematics, John. An' guesswork. Two times two. Equals four. But we haven't found the total yet. Damn it, old chap, can't you see? Listen! You know bloody well, as I said, there weren't any phantoms, killing those men. Those seven sentries who were murdered died with bullets in 'em. Why they were shot I can't imagine. But I know this, an' everybody else in the fort would know it if they would think like men instead of kids. Bullets are fired from guns. Human hands fire guns. An' the beggar popping off our men was a bloody good marksman, we can figure that."

His match whisked out, and he struck another. His voice rasped out through the close shadows, and his monocle gleamed. "So a good marksman had been doin' some damn fine sharpshootin', an' picking off our men. A bloody fine marksman, Yankee! His victims were hit in the head every time, an' from a good distance, too. I knew that sharpshooter was out on the desert when he got the Swiss squarely between the eyes. The Swiss was on the east wall, an' the gunner was somewhere out among those rocks,

An' he made the finest shot in the world when he picked off the Frenchman, Proust, way on the other side of the fort. Got him right through the back of his head. See what kind of a marksman this fellow is?"

"But this here tunnel, Bill? An' how—"

ENGLISH BILL talked fast.

"Well, John, no Arab can shoot like that. Besides, no Arab could have got out behind those bowlders facin' our east wall without bein' seen or leaving tracks. Two times two, then. A phantom isn't shooting our men. An Arab can't be doin' it. But a bleedin' good sharpshooter is! Who is it, then? Who're the best shots in this country? *We* are! Legionnaires! See? One of us has been doin' this sharpshooting. One of us legionnaires has been getting out there on the desert off the east wall and knocking down our sentries. I've been puzzling over this ever since that first killing in April.

"How'd he get out there without leaving any trace? Underground passage, of course. Why the bloody hell I never guessed it before I can't imagine. But this used to be an old Touareg fort. An' these Arab forts were always honeycombed with secret tunnels. See? Then, if there was a tunnel it had to lead from that ancient wall left standin' behind the cook house."

John Goodwin swore a gorgeous oath of the sea. "Bill, I think you got it figgered! He had to have a way to get out there an' a way to get back here quick, so's he could get back in the barracks the time the rumpus started when the dead man was found."

"That's it, John. That's why I guessed the door would be in a wall near the center of the fort. Made it easy to locate, then."

Abruptly English Bill stopped talking, held high another flaring match, and scrutinized the steps before him. "By God, Yankee, I'm not on the job!

Whoever's been using this tunnel has gone through already. There's a fresh heelprint on that top step, or I'm a bloomin' liar!"

Voicing a word of caution, English Bill crept down the steps. Goodwin followed, gun in fist. Ancient plaster, laid, perhaps, in those days when the Apostle of Islam had not yet flourished his scimitar west of Arabia, crumbled under their treading boots. At the bottom of the stairway English Bill held up a pointing finger, and John Goodwin saw a shoulder-wide, head-high corridor wander into Stygian darkness where the match light failed.

"There she leads," English Bill whispered. "An' some one's been goin' through her, as you can see. Damned if I know who! I can't tell who because I can't figure who'd want to kill us so." A queer, frigid smile crossed the Englishman's tight lips. "But keep your gun handy, John. The man you'll find at the end of this trail is a bloody good shot—an' a killer!"

Goodwin nodded, tapping his automatic barrel. English Bill's last match guttered out, and his sweaty, lean face vanished. Thereafter they picked way through a darkness as thick as fudge. English Bill took the lead, moving carefully, wary of pitfall or jagged rock, panting out an occasional warning to indicate a turn in the path. Goodwin followed, automatic poised for action in a nervous fist. Sweat was leaking down the gaunt American's cheeks, and there was a curious little feeling in the stomach behind his sash.

WHEN they came to the end, it was an abrupt thing—like strolling into a pool of clean water. Standing in a well of fresh air, they looked upward at a patch of far-off indigo sky, and English Bill's monocle caught the gleam of the brilliant gold stars. The steps ascended steeply, like a ladder mounting to

heaven. English Bill went first, and when he reached the top he crouched as if stricken to stone. John Goodwin, the American, followed. At the top step he, too, petrified. Stiff and quiet as mummies, those two legionnaires crouched at the mouth of the tunnel, wrought into stone by their staring.

Without flicking an eyelash, without moving a muscle, they stared. No sound did they make; therefore the ghostly figure pasted flat atop the slab of rock some six feet away never stirred in his vigil, never took his gaze from the walls of Fort Avant-poste distant across the moon-washed sands. If the men behind him were turned to stone, the wraithlike watcher was part of the rock on which he lay. A shadow blended his recumbent figure into the flat gray slab, but straying moonbeams found a glint in steel at his side; and the spying legionnaires discovered the outlines and stock of a long-barreled Krag-Jorgensen repeating rifle.

"Now!" breathed the Englishman.

"Now!" the American barked.

As one man they sprang. Together they leaped the six feet to the rock. The man on the stone slithered around with the speed of a catamount. For half a half second the legionnaires glimpsed a face inhuman, eyes like twin emeralds that blazed green with fury. The wild face ducked. Up sprang the long-barreled gun.

Twisting about in his mad lunge, Goodwin trapped the barrel in his free hand, tearing the rifle from its owner's fierce grasp. Clawing hands tangled his legs, brought him down in a blind stumble. English Bill was tumbling around somewhere. Goodwin fought to escape ripping fingers. The rifle clicked smartly in his hand, gave a muffled *thump!* It jerked. A faint odor of burned powder promptly stung the air. The body beneath the American relaxed, became soft, wet. Gasping, John Goodwin lurched to his feet. English Bill had a hand digging fin-

gers into his arm. The Englishman's monocle was ogling an expression as foolish as a verse from the Koran.

"There, Yankee! Look there! You got him right through the heart with his own gun! Shot him with that high-powered Danish gun, an' smack through his heart! An' him the finest shot in all the Legion—"

There he lay, flat on his back on the slab of gray rock. Blood gurgled up from the breast of his tunic, struggled in miniature rivers down to his belt. Moonlight painted white as snow the mustaches above his smile. Moonbeams played in his silvery hair. Dreaming up at the star-scattered sky, the face of Colonel Thibaut Meilhac was kind.

GOODWIN fell on his knees beside the rock.

"It can't be him," he groaned. "It can't be him, English Bill! It can't be Father Thibaut!"

"Can't be," agreed the Englishman in a gray whisper, "but it is. Father Thibaut! Been creepin' out here through that tunnel an' takin' pot-shots at his own men with that Krag-Jorgensen gun muffled by a silencer. I—I guessed a silenced rifle was doin' the murders, John, but I—never—only when he came out with all his medals at the funeral, an' half of 'em were for sharpshooting. My God, John, old man, this is bloody awful!"

"But, colonel—colonel!" Goodwin moaned. His angular face was pinched with pain, and muscles throbbed in his throat. "Father Thibaut! An' you the finest soldier in the world! This is plain hell, English Bill! I been with him half around the world. He was my friend—a friend to all o' us poor devils. An' now—why'd he do it, Bill? Why's he been doin' this—"

English Bill wiped moisture from his monocle and screwed it into his eye. Removing his *kepi*, he looked reverently down on the dead, kind face. Chill desert breeze stirred the colonel's

silvered hair. English Bill slowly shook his head, tapped his temple with a lean finger.

"That's why, John," he said in a low voice. "*Cafard*. Colonel Meilhac was pretty old, you know. Been in the service for years, an' probably lyin' about his age to keep off the pension list. Hard work, disappointments, bein' stationed out here—the heat an' all turned his mind. Didn't you see his eyes when he jumped around on us? Blazin' like flame! Daft! Clean daft! Men do queer things when they've gone *cafard*, Yankee. Insanity can't be reckoned with, and it's sometimes devil-shrewd. He was shrewd enough to come out here, pick off a man, sneak back into the tunnel an' tug this flat stone into place behind him, to cover up the tunnel mouth so he never left a trace. May have been out of his head for a year, an' acting as rational in front of us as you please. He was always so afraid his men would go *cafard*. An' it finally got him, bad."

Goodwin brushed an arm across his forehead: "Poor colonel. I feel as if I'd shot my own dad. He was our friend, Bill. A great soldier. An' now when this leaks out—about him murderin'—"

The English legionnaire grabbed the American legionnaire by the hand. "Listen, John! It can't leak out! We mustn't let it! It would raise bloody hell in the outpost. The colonel—they would never believe he was mad—

wouldn't understand. They'd dump his body in the sand. He'd be disgraced. We can't turn him over to 'em like this. We can't let 'em know. For his honor we can't! And the honor of France!"

"But what can we do?"

"Wait! Suppose we could make it look like he'd sneaked out here durin' the night to reconnoiter. Make it look like he'd had a bally hunch, an' come out here alone. Wind's blowin' hard to-night, an' would have covered his tracks. The sentries would think they had missed seein' him. Well, he sneaks out here lookin' for his ghost marksman. That's what it would look like. He finds the sharpshooter an' gets shot, but as he drops he shoots the sharpshooter. We make it look like that, you see. Then we duck back into the passage an' get ourselves out of the picture."

"But how—"

"Don't you see? We'll shoot the first Arab who comes near here. We'll drop our fired automatic beside the colonel, an' fling his silenced rifle over beside the dead Arab. The automatic shot will rouse the outpost, but before they get here we're down in the tunnel. The Arab found with this rifle will look like the murderer. An' the colonel will be a hero, as he was at heart."

"But—"

"My God, John, here comes an Arab now! Down that cañon, there! Here goes! For the honor of France!"

THE END.





*A strange procession they made in
the shadows and semidarkness*

The Big Shot

*With her lover marked for death by the underworld czar who, she is certain,
is her own brother, Enid Howard battles alone in the dark to
stave off a gangland catastrophe*

By FRANK L. PACKARD

Author of "The Miracle Man," "The Locked Book," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ENID HOWARD, who is living on the East Side with a former housekeeper of her family, to gather local color for a book she is writing, has met Phil Martin, a reporter on the *Herald-Star*. In the Gondola Restaurant, on Third Avenue, where they became acquainted, he tells her that from Shive Frank, a gangster he has befriended, he has learned something about the "Big Shot," the uncrowned ruler of the underworld. Shive Frank is to give him the photograph of the Big Shot, taken in a group picture at Coney Island.

On her way home, Shive Frank runs up beside her, and asks her to give Phil Martin the picture, because he is be-

ing followed and doesn't dare to. Indignantly she refuses, but he drops it on the sidewalk and runs, leaving her no choice but to pick it up. A block away, a car draws up alongside Shive Frank and riddles him with bullets.

Terrified, she returns home, and looks at the photograph. She is certain it is her brother Roy, who had been reported missing in the World War. Locking the snapshot in her trunk, she leaves the house, though it is after midnight, and prowls around the back of Izzy Myers's junk shop, which is, according to Phil Martin's information, one of the gang's hangouts. There she overhears Myers tell two of his men to hurry to Eightieth Street and Sec-

This story began in the *Argosy-Allstory Weekly* for May 18.

ond Avenue, to meet the Big Shot; he wants them to raid some loot that Twisty Morgan, a rival mob leader, has just taken in. Enid hurries away, hoping to be first at the rendezvous.

She hides, seeing the two men, Skinny and Maloch meet the Big Shot—who, she is certain, is her brother—and enter a house. But she sees a policeman running to phone, so she follows the men into the house, to warn her brother. They escape, taking her along; and a bullet gouges her scalp.

She comes to in the Big Shot's luxurious home. The morning papers featured the unidentified "girl bandit," the lookout who had warned the gangsters—herself!

The Big Shot denies he is her brother Roy. He says he is Norman (Norry) Kane, of Chicago; and although he says he was knocked out during the war and woke up in a prison camp with his memory utterly gone, yet he was taken on an American front; and when he returned to New York, Izzy Myers recognized him, brought his parents from Chicago, and they, too, identified him. So have other Chicago gangsters since. He had, he is told, been a crook there before the war. It is a case of mistaken identity, he claims.

He knows that Phil Martin, the reporter, is on his trail, and doesn't know how much Shive Frank has told him; so he plans to remove Martin. Enid, torn between her love for her "brother" and her growing realization of how much she cares for Martin, determines to slip away from the house that night and warn Phil, then return and try to rescue "Roy" from his life of crime.

CHAPTER VIII (*Continued*).

AT DEAD OF NIGHT.

THE rest of the afternoon she had divided between intervals in bed, and intervals of walking, barefooted, silently, up and down and around the room to accustom herself

to the exercise. No one had come near her except Runty, the little man with the crooked arm, who looked more like a benign old clergyman than a one-time pickpocket ace, and who had brought her an excellently cooked meal. The Kanes, whether through instructions from Roy or not, had left her to her own devices.

And now the way was clear. Runty had removed the tray, and Roy had gone out—and she, presumably, had settled down for the night. She was quite sure after what she had said to Roy that no one would come to the room while she was away. It was quite safe—she was confident of that. She had only to slip out of the window and return by the same way when she had accomplished her purpose.

She meant to telephone the newspaper office in the hope that Phil might be there, or that they would tell her where he was. Failing that she would look for him at the Gondola; if he were not there, she would leave a note for him with Joe Caprillo, and at the same time, to make assurance doubly sure, she would send a duplicate of the note to the newspaper office.

She could not, of course, tell Phil how she had come by the knowledge that he was in danger; but, whether she spoke to him personally or reached him by means of a note, she could make it plain and unmistakable to him that he must be on his guard, and make him realize that, while he did not know the Big Shot, the Big Shot knew him and all about his associations with Shive.

She began to put on her hat. It would, with a little delicate coaxing, just slip over the bandage, and, when on, would hide the bandage nicely, she knew, for she had experimented with it during the afternoon; but it was a little more difficult now in the darkness. The bandage must not be disturbed, and—

From somewhere she heard the faint ringing of a bell—the doorbell, she supposed. Mechanically she adjusted her

hat as she listened. Yes, it had been the doorbell, for she could hear some one going to the front door now. Did it make any difference? It couldn't be Roy, for he would surely have had a key, and there was certainly no one else who could affect her plans.

Yet still she listened. The front door opened and closed—and suddenly she found herself standing tense and rigid, as a man's voice harsh and loud with excitement reached her.

"Where's the Big Shot?" he demanded. "Maloch's killed, curse 'em; but," with a coarse laugh, "we got Martin, that sneaking newspaper fool, all right, and that's—"

"Hold your tongue!" a woman's voice interrupted sharply. "That damned girl's back in there, and"—her voice broke into a savage sneer—"the sweet thing's not to be disturbed! Norry's out. So's everybody else but me. Come into the front room here—and tell your story—and I want to talk to *you*, too."

A door closed softly. Enid could hear no more. There had been something familiar about the man's voice though she could not quite place it; the woman, of course, was Mrs. Kane. Her hands clenched tightly at her sides. What did it matter who they were! Her face, she knew, was white with fear and anxiety. What had he meant by saying they had "got" Phil?

Her clenched hands opened—she wrung them together. Not dead! He couldn't mean that! They—they hadn't killed Phil! Oh, not that—not that! Before she had been able to warn him! They had struck too quickly for her. The tears sprang into her eyes. She dashed them away. What had the man meant? What had they done to Phil? She must know—no matter what the risk, she must know!

SHE opened the door of her room silently, inch by inch; and then stepped out cautiously into what proved to be a dimly-lighted and thick-

carpeted hall. She had never, of course, been out of her room before and the surroundings were strange to her, but a glance showed her that on the side of the hall opposite her room there were two doors—the one nearer the front of the house being closed, while the other, wide open, disclosed an unlighted room.

Now she caught the sound of voices again. The sound seemed to come from the farther room, and yet at the same time seemed to reach her through that open door. Yes, of course! She could see now a faint glow of light in the nearer room that was filtering in from somewhere other than the hall. Connecting rooms!

Her footsteps made no sound on the heavy carpet as she moved swiftly forward. She stepped over the threshold of the open doorway, and the next instant she was far enough within the room to see that it was separated only from the front room by a pair of drawn portières. And now, standing well back, herself secure from observation, she could not only hear distinctly, but, where the hangings fell a little apart, could see into the room beyond.

Izzy Myers! That was why the man's voice had sounded familiar. He had flung himself into a chair and was twisting a cigar around in his mouth. He looked flushed, excited and ugly. She could not see Mrs. Kane so well, for the woman was still standing, and was a little out of the line of vision; but she caught a glimpse of angry black eyes and a clenched hand.

It was Mrs. Kane who was talking—and there was no mistaking the passion in the woman's voice:

"No, of course, he don't believe her, but he doesn't think she's nutty or anything like that. He thinks she's straight and that she believes what she says, and that he looks like her brother; but, because she was only a kid when she saw him last, he thinks her mistake is natural enough.

"Sure!" grunted Izzy Myers.

"Well, that's all there is to it, ain't it?"

"No; it ain't!" said Mrs. Kane savagely. "It won't end there! She's dangerous! I'm afraid of her—and I'm afraid of her because I know she's straight. She's going to cling to Norry like a leech on that brother stuff, and what's going to happen with Norry letting her hang around him if our honest little Sunday school miss gets to know too much? I'm asking you, what's going to happen then—to you and me, and all the rest of us? I'll tell you! Sing Sing! And the little red house up there for some of us, at that! She's going to split because her baby conscience wouldn't let her do anything else! Does that register?"

Izzy Myers scowled.

"Aw, say," he said, "she's in bad with the police herself now 'count of last night."

"Yes," jeered Mrs. Kane, "and do you think that makes us safe? It's possibly true for now—I dare say it is; but it wouldn't count if she found out *some things!*"

Izzy Myers's scowl deepened.

"No; I'll say it wouldn't!" he agreed with an oath. "Well, what's the answer?"

"Get rid of her!" snapped Mrs. Kane.

"You mean a ride?"

"What do you think I mean? There's only one sure way—and that's the easiest way, isn't it? Are you getting squeamish?"

"I ain't never yet. Why don't you go ahead and do it, then? You've got her handy enough here, ain't you?"

"I can't do it while she's in this house, you fool!" retorted Mrs. Kane. "If Norry got wise, it would be good night. Norry's going to let her go home in another day or so, and in that time she can't do any more harm here than she's done already; but once she leaves this house the less time that's lost the better. I guess it's up to you, isn't it? And I guess you don't need to be told

how to put it across, either, do you—so that Norry won't get next?"

ENID shivered as she passed her hand across her eyes. Was this real? Had anything been real since last night when she had left Phil Martin at the Gondola? Izzy Myers, by the expression on his face, was debating in his mind the advisability of murdering her, with as few qualms as though he were considering the extinction of a house fly!

"I get you!" said Izzy Myers, delivering his verdict with an unpleasant smile. "You've pulled the right dope. Safety first! We can't take any chances with her. You can't do nothing to her here, but I can see she's got to croak. Sure! All right! Leave it to me. I don't know what kind of an accident it'll be, but I'll fix it so's Norry'll never tumble. That good enough?"

"Yes!" Mrs. Kane's sigh was one of vicious and unhallowed relief.

"Well, forget her then until you read about it in the papers," said Izzy Myers casually; "and if it ain't never in the papers I'll tell you what happened. Where'd you say the Big Shot was?"

"I didn't say," Mrs. Kane replied.

"I said he was out; don't know where."

"That ain't so good!" Izzy Myers rumbled his forehead as he chewed in sudden anxiety on his cigar. "I'll have to find him. I told you, didn't I, that Maloch's got the spot, and that we've got that newspaper bird?"

"Yes, but you didn't tell me anything else about it. Who bumped Maloch off?"

Izzy Myers burst into a torrent of fervent blasphemy.

"Who d'you think, after last night? Twisty Morgan's crowd, of course! They plugged him in the back room of French Charlie's about half an hour ago."

Mrs. Kane drew in her breath sharply.

"I don't like that!" she said. "That means trouble."

"You've said a mouthful!" he snarled. "There's going to be a lot of glass wagons gumming up the traffic for this, blast 'em to the pit!"

"And who's going to be riding in them?" inquired Mrs. Kane acidly.

"Twisty is—as soon as we can nose him out. And while we're waiting for that we'll take care of the others. Riding in them? They will!"

"Or us," amended Mrs. Kane caustically. "We started it last night."

Izzy Myers's eyes narrowed in ugly fashion.

"No, we didn't—but we'll finish it!" he asserted fiercely. "You know damned well it's six months old, over that coke deal when Twisty double crossed us. As Maloch said last night, Twisty ought to have been bumped off long ago."

"Yes," observed Mrs. Kane significantly; "and to-night it's Maloch that's dead! I don't like it, I tell you! This will only end up in us or them getting wiped out."

"Yeh!" growled Izzy Myers. "That's what I said! That's what we're going to do to them—wipe 'em out!"

Mrs. Kane stamped her foot.

"You're fools!" she flung out curiously. "All of you! This gang war stuff is mad! You can't any of you see an inch ahead of your noses. Why don't you attend to your own business instead of getting down on your bended knees and asking the police to butt in and hand you one over the bean? You're fools! You hear me? Every damned one of you! I'll talk to Norry about this! And what about this newspaper man? Butting in there, too, are you? Asking for more trouble! My God, the newspapers! What about this fellow Martin?"

"Yes!" said Enid to herself tensely; and held her clenched hands tight against her cheeks. "Yes! Phil! What have you done to Phil?" It

was the one question she wanted to ask—the one answer she wanted to hear—the one reason why she was standing here. What did Twisty Morgan matter, or a gang feud?

"**S**AY, what's biting you to-night?" A sullen note was creeping into Izzy Myers's voice. "You give me a pain! We didn't do any butting in! He's the bird that did that, see? He's looking for a pat on the back from his paper, and maybe a few extra dollars, and everybody telling him how smart he is because he was able to get the goods on the Big Shot of New York that nobody else couldn't do. Get me? He's trying to nominate Norry for the juice jolt up the river, and hoping he'll clean up enough of the rest of us at the same time so's they'll have to put twin beds in the cells to accommodate the crowd. Butting in! I ask you! Well, he won't butt in any more!"

"Where is he? What have you done to him?" demanded Mrs. Kane.

"He's tied up and chewing on a gag down in the 'birdcage' on Eighty-Third Street, and Batty Rose is keeping lone house and looking after him."

"You surely don't mean that same old place near Avenue A?" Mrs. Kane's voice rose accusingly, challengingly.

"Yes, that's what I do mean, and don't fly off the handle again if you can help it!" Izzy Myers laughed shortly. "What you need to-night is a dose of soothing sirup! I know all about not being able to get by with a 'To Let' sign forever, and that we'd decided our time was up there, and that we'd better make a shift at once; but it ain't so easy to find the right place, and it ain't so easy to fix up the deal, either. We ain't—"

Enid heard no more. Swiftly, silently she gained the hall, entered her own room, and closed the door. He was alive! Phil was alive! And she knew where he was. He was alive—but there was no time to lose!

Her hand bag—the unloaded automatic! She would need that, and it would not always be unloaded. She crossed the room in the darkness, secured the hand bag, and, going then to the window, began to raise it cautiously. A house "To Let" on Eighty-Third Street near Avenue A. Pray God there was not more than one vacant house in that vicinity!

The window was up now. She swung herself quickly over the sill to the ground, and the next instant was running across the yard toward the gate that opened on the lane.

CHAPTER IX.

IN DISGUISE.

WITH her latch key Enid let herself into Martha Debbins's house, and, running along the hall, entered the small living and work room that connected with her bedroom. She turned on the light, and pulled open the drawer of her desk where she kept the reserve supply of ammunition for her automatic.

Her eyes, as she began to load the weapon, roved about the room. The typewriter, the pile of manuscript, the odds and ends, the telephone on the desk that she had had installed when she had come to live here, the photographs of her father and mother on the mantelpiece, were all just as she had left them. These were her belongings, this was her home—and yet it seemed incredible that she had ever lived here and had been peacefully engaged in an effort to write a book!

Her book! Would it ever be written now? She did not know. It was not likely—and in the light of other things it was now of very little consequence. It was as though her entire life had been transformed, as though she were no longer even herself; that she was some one else through whose eyes she was witnessing, and through whose body she was participating in a chaos

of crime and ruthless violence—and only danger, and anxiety, and an unreality that was filled with horror seethed around her.

Her fingers worked mechanically at the loading of the pistol. The telephone caught her eye again. It offered mute assistance—there was a world of people at the other end. Yes, but not one, no one to whom she dared appeal.

Certainly not the police! If she telephoned the police they would go to the house with the "To Let" sign and liberate Phil undoubtedly—but they would also quite as certainly be waiting there when Izzy Myers returned with the Big Shot, with Roy! The newspaper office was just as bad.

She had even thought of Joe Caprillo, but she could not picture the grimy, ingratiating little proprietor of the Gondola running himself voluntarily into any physical danger; and, besides, she did not trust him. The trails all led to Roy—and as long as she could do so, and at the same time still save Phil Martin, she must do her utmost to protect Roy.

No; no telephone! Why had it even intruded itself? She shook her head. She had thought it all out on her way uptown from Roy's house on Fifty-First Street. She must depend on herself and on herself alone just as long as she could. Morally Roy did not deserve prison. Her conscience and her love were on common ground there. She had saved him from it last night—and she would save him from it always so far as she was able.

The automatic was loaded now. She laid it down on the desk, and, hurrying from the room, began to mount the stairs to the second story. The reloading of her pistol had been one of the two reasons for her return here to her rooms; the other one had come to her on her way uptown as an inspiration—at least she hoped it would prove to have been an inspiration.

Time, of course, was a vital factor, but she felt that she had a fairly safe

margin to work on, and that in the very nature of things this visit would not delay her very much. She did not know the number of Roy's house; but, having carefully located the lane so that she could return by the same way she had come, she knew that his house fronted on Fifty-First Street, therefore her own rooms lay, as it were, almost directly on her way from Roy's to that house somewhere on Eighty-Third Street near Avenue A, and her coming here could cost her but very little extra time.

But in any case, though she would lose not a moment more than she could help, it was imperative that she should come here in order to carry out the plan she had formulated, and which it seemed to her now was so necessary, not only in the present instance, but for the future, if she was to preserve contact with Roy.

SHE reached the head of the stairs, and entered Martha Debbins's bedroom. Her lips were suddenly tight. Her plan! Yes, it frightened her just a little. But, she told herself reassuringly as she turned on the light, it wasn't nearly so desperate an adventure as it appeared to be on the surface. She had only one man, a man named Batty Rose, to contend with. That was what Izzy Myers had said—that Batty Rose was alone in the "birdcage" with Phil Martin. She had only this Batty Rose to outwit.

She was working with cool, quick precision now. This was her inspiration. Martha was a middle-aged woman and painfully old-fashioned in her dress. From the clothes-closet Enid procured a somewhat shabby dress of dark material; the bureau drawers furnished a pair of black cotton stockings and a discarded pair of spectacles; a little search discovered a pair of worn, low-heeled shoes; and the shelf of the closet disclosed an unstylish and frayed old hat with a wide brim.

She made the change rapidly, and surveyed herself in the mirror. It was far from being perfect as a disguise, but the result was even better than she had hoped for. The skirt reached almost to her ankles, the hat brim flopped over her eyes, and her whole appearance was draggled. She looked a frump. The description that Batty Rose, who had never seen her before, would be able to give, would certainly never connect her in the Big Shot's mind with Enid Howard, the girl who was supposed to be ill in bed in the house on Fifty-First Street!

Yes, it was all right so far as the purpose of this makeshift disguise concerned Batty Rose; but in order to reach Batty Rose she would be obliged to come into contact with the outside world, and she must do so without attracting undue attention to herself, let alone inviting the slightest degree of suspicion.

The mirror told her that there was something noticeably incongruous about her appearance in this attempt of hers to pass for a middle-aged, inoffensive little woman of the poorer class. Her clothes carried out the idea perfectly, and, thanks to the hat, no one would have been able to tell whether her hair was gray, brown or yellow; but, in spite of the added assistance furnished by the spectacles, she looked too young!

This gave her a moment of anxiety, and then a queer little smile of relief crossed her lips. She must make herself look more like a hard-working woman and one who perhaps, either through habit or the hurry of her life to make both ends meet, did not pay too strict attention to her personal cleanliness.

Downstairs in the kitchen there were cold ashes in the stove. A little grime, though she must be careful not to overdo it, would remove the freshness from her face—yes, and disguise those well-kept hands of hers as well.

Well, she was ready now except for

that further metamorphosis, and that long coat of Martha's hanging in the lower hall which had an inside pocket where she could carry her automatic and so dispense with her hand bag—which latter would have been both obtrusive and awkward.

She turned out the light and ran down the stairs. In the kitchen, with the aid of a hand-glass which she took from her bedroom, she put on her improvised make-up as artistically as she could. She nodded her head in satisfaction. It quite answered the purpose—she no longer looked so startlingly young. She even tried to smile a little at herself. She certainly did not look at all like Enid Howard!

But the minutes were flying! She had not been long in the house, not nearly so long as it had seemed, she was sure, but, long or short as her stay had been, she certainly had not a single minute to waste. She returned the hand-glass to her bedroom, picked up her loaded automatic from the desk, took her purse from her hand bag, extinguished all the lights, flung herself into Martha's old coat, and locking the front door behind her, stepped out onto the street.

WHICH was the quickest way? There was only a surface line on First Avenue and none at all on Avenue A. She could, of course, take the Second Avenue elevated at Sixty-Fifth Street and get off at Eightieth as she had done last night; but, on top of the time it would take her to reach the elevated station from here, it would leave her with five blocks to walk when she got to Eightieth Street. Well, then, a taxi?

Her appearance was certainly not that of one accustomed to spend money on the luxury of a taxi, and she would have preferred to avoid the use of one now; but at this hour in the light traffic it would undoubtedly make good time—and, after all, what did it matter if the driver's curiosity were

aroused and that he might later remember he had set an unusual sort of fare down at, say, Avenue A and Eighty-Second Street? She certainly would not have him take her any nearer her real destination than that!

She had reached the corner of Second Avenue now, and after but a moment's wait was able to hail a passing taxi. She gave the chauffeur the address she had decided upon, and, with the added injunction to hurry, entered the car.

She settled herself for the ride as patiently as she could. How much time did she really have—was it a question of hours to spare, or merely minutes? How wide was that margin of safety?

She had told herself all along that it was ample and she still believed so—Izzy Myers had not been in so great haste, but that he had been willing to sit down and talk to Mrs. Kane, and even after he had once left Fifty-First Street it would be a question of searching for Roy without anything definite to go on except to make the round of what he would consider the likely places. It would, in the ordinary run of things, take him a long time to find Roy, hours probably; and yet, as she sat here inactive, doubts and fears began to assume uncomfortable proportions—if by chance he had run into Roy almost at the start, the race between Izzy Myers and herself would be a close one.

No! She shook her head resolutely. She would not let herself be driven into a panic. There was still another little margin of safety. There was no imperative need for Roy to go to the birdcage the instant Izzy Myers got in touch with him—any time during the night would do. Roy was not likely to make a rush for the place. And, besides, the news that Maloch had been shot by Twisty Morgan's gang would almost certainly claim the Big Shot's first consideration and would materially affect his movements.

Nevertheless, fast as the taxi was traveling, she wished it would go faster.

Her thoughts swung into another channel—but one that was even more torturing, far less conducive to her peace of mind. If it were not that the man she loved was in very real danger of perhaps even his life, what she was doing now would have seemed quixotic, chimerical and foolhardy—but it was the only way out that she saw for both Phil and Roy. But afterward?

Even if she was successful to-night, what about the afterward? What about her future relationship with Phil? She was the sister of a criminal. Yes, it was back again, that thought with all its poignant suffering! True, from the moment she had realized what she believed was the scurrilous trickery that had started Roy on his career of crime, she had not considered him morally guilty—but the law would not look on it in the same way, nor would the world. She could not make a social outcast of Phil Martin. She could never do anything to harm his career or embitter his future. And so there could never be anything between him and herself.

Her eyes were suddenly blurred and wet as she stared out of the window. She had no reason to believe that he cared for her; or that he ever would care—and she hoped now that it was that way. It would be so much easier for them both. She would love him always, because that love had come into her life for always—but he would never know. It was her love that was taking her to him to-night.—but he'd not know that either. And Roy? It was not Roy's fault. But—but—oh, what would be the end of it all?

HER mind worked on and on relentlessly, and it was almost in a startled way that she realized the taxi had drawn up to the curb and had come to a halt. She got out and

paid her fare, adding a tip that was moderate enough, she thought, to be in keeping with her appearance. The taxi rattled away. A little to her surprise, but also to her relief, the man had not seemed to take the slightest interest in her. Well, after all, why should he? He probably drove a lot of queer people in a day. She would not hesitate the next time if she ever required a taxi again under like circumstances!

She walked rapidly along the block that separated her from Eighty-Third Street, and on reaching the corner took the natural turn into the cross-street. She had no means of knowing whether the house with the "To Let" sign was in the direction toward East End Avenue or whether it was west of Avenue A, nor on which side of the street it was. She only knew that it was "near" Avenue A, and that she would have to search for it until she found it.

She walked a little way down the street without result, then crossed over and went back on the other side of the street to the avenue—with still no sign of what she sought. She then did precisely the same thing on both sides west of the avenue—but with no greater success.

Grim little lines formed at the corner of her mouth. And she had even been afraid that there might have been more than one "To Let" sign! Well, she would have preferred that alternative to none at all! What was the matter? What was wrong? She was positive that she had made no mistake. This was the street, and the house should be here somewhere. Perhaps she had interpreted the "near" too narrowly and had not extended the search far enough away from the avenue—yes, that must be the reason; there couldn't be any other. She would try that now anyhow. Thank Heaven there was scarcely any one about, or her crossing and recrossing of the street and avenue would be sure to attract attention!

She began her circuit again—and came suddenly upon the object of her search. Yes, there it was: a house "To Let." It was a little further from the avenue in this direction than she had been before, that was all. She had been right in her surmise.

Swiftly, critically she surveyed the house. The dark curtainless windows were like blind eyes staring out into the night. Blind eyes! How did she know? It was quite possible that she was being watched at this moment from within. The house wasn't empty in spite of its "To Let" sign and its desolate appearance!

Her pulse began to quicken. There was something suddenly foreboding about the house; but, too, she noted with some relief that it had a basement entrance beneath the stoop which would shield her from observation from the houses across the street and to a very large extent from any passers-by as well.

She glanced now up and down the street. There was no one near at hand, and she stepped down to the basement door. It was quite dark here and she could scarcely see at all. She began to feel with her hand around the jamb of the door.

There was only one way to get in. She had no skeleton keys and no burglar tools—which latter she would not have known how to use in any event. Yes, here it was! Her hand closed on the bell knob and pulled it—and, listening, she heard a faint, responsive jangle from within.

Her automatic was snuggling in her right hand now. She did not expect the doorbell in an empty and untenanted house to be answered—at least not in the usual way. Batty Rose was not fool enough for that; but if she persisted in ringing it would lure him to the other side of the door and that was all she wanted. She had an "open sesame" then that would do the rest.

She rang again—and still again. And now she kept her ear pressed

against the door panel. Yes, she was sure of it—there was a stealthy movement from within—from quite close to the other side of the door.

"Batty!" she called in an undertone. "Batty! Open the door."

There was no answer—and now no sound.

"Batty, you fool, there's some one coming, and I'll be seen!" Her voice was sharp, imperative, raised a little. "Open the door—quick! I've got a message from Izzy Myers."

Then the door opened silently upon a black interior—and she entered.

CHAPTER X.

THE "VACANT" HOUSE.

THE door closed softly behind her. Batty Rose could not be more than arm's-length away. From where she stood and by feeling out around her to locate his position, she knew she was near enough to have touched the man—but she could not see him. It was as though some black curtain of heavy, impenetrable texture hung between them.

It was so dark that even if she knew exactly where he stood and had him covered with her automatic, he could have leaped aside or even upon her before she would have been aware of what he was about. True, she might shoot him, but he was at the moment too valuable for that—it was an amenable, not a dead Batty Rose that she wanted.

His voice reached her now in a snarling whisper:

"Say, it's damned funny Izzy sending a skirt around here! Who t'hell are youse, anyway? An' wot d'youse want?"

"I told you what I wanted," Enid answered tartly. "You took a long time to open that door!"

"Yeh! Wot d'youse think we're doing here—holding public receptions?"

"I don't know about that," she complained; "but that's no reason for taking the risk of letting somebody see me out there. People aren't in the habit of ringing the doorbells of vacant houses at night for nothing. You ought to have known! Haven't you got a light around here somewhere?"

"Youse have got a flip tongue, ain't youse," he snapped. "Vacant houses ain't in de habit of answering door bells, an' vacant houses don't have any lights showing neither. Youse cut out de gab an' come across! Where's dat message from Izzy Myers?"

"Sure, I'll come across!" she answered sharply. "You're the one that's wasting time! You can't read in the dark, can you? I guess you've got lights in here somewhere where they won't be seen from outside."

"Yes, sure, I've got one"—there was a sudden menace in his voice—"an' I guess I'll use it to take a look at youse before I do anything else! It's damned funny Izzy sending a skirt around here like dis!"

"That's what you said before!" She was jeering at him now, prodding him to action. "Well, what are you going to do about it? Stand there all night? Izzy'll be pleased! If you give me the answer to his message to-morrow morning some time it will be all right—that's why I came down here in a hurry when there wasn't time for him to find anybody else!"

"Close yer face, an' feel yer way along de wall," growled Batty Rose. "I wouldn't even strike a match down here, 'cause there's a window off the hall. We'll get a light upstairs where it's safe. Get a move on!"

"All right!" she said airily, and began to grope her way down the hall.

How inky black it was! And there was something that chilled her blood in the sound of those footsteps following there behind her. Fear came suddenly. Her fingers tightened over her automatic. Yes, that brought reassurance.

She had gained admittance to the house and played her part well enough with Batty Rose so far—and Phil was here somewhere.

She must not lose her poise now. In a minute or two more, when there was light enough to see, she would have an ally, even if an unwilling one, to join her in Phil's rescue.

Her foot struck the riser of a chair and she stumbled. Behind her Batty Rose laughed raucously:

"Didn't I tell youse we were going upstairs? Can't youse lift yer feet?"

She made no answer as she recovered herself and went on; but at the head of the stairs she paused.

"I can't see anything," she said. "I don't know where to go."

"Wait where youse are, den," he replied gruffly.

SHE felt him brush by her—and a moment later, as he struck a match, she saw that he was standing a few yards away in what seemed to be a sort of recess in the hall, and that he was reaching out with the match to light a candle that stood on a ledge of some kind against the wall.

She stepped quietly, swiftly forward. The candle wick spurted into yellow flame.

"Now we'll take a look at youse," he said, as he straightened up.

Her hand shot forward, the muzzle of her automatic on a line with his eyes.

"Better look at *this*!" she said in a hard, metallic monotone.

He drew back with a startled oath.

"Hell!" he flung out furiously. "I thought dere was something phony about it, but, at dat, youse've put one over, ain't youse, blast youse! Wot's de idea, an' who are youse?"

He was not a prepossessing object—her impression was that of a hulking figure with a bullet head and close-cropped black hair, and small black eyes that squinted under drooping lids.

"Never mind who I am," she said coldly. "Put your hands up over your head."

"Nix!" he said sullenly. "Not for a skirt! Look out dat thing don't go off an' frighten youse! An' maybe dere's mice in here too"—he was edging slightly toward her—"dere ain't nobody been living in de house for a long time!"

"There'll be one who won't be living in it much longer if you make any move other than to do as you are told," she said icily. "I don't want to hurt you—perhaps because I am only a nervous woman, as you suggest; but, on the other hand, because I *am* a woman and have to choose between you and Phil Martin, whom you've got hidden somewhere in this house; you will perhaps understand, though you may never have heard the quotation, that I am more deadly than the male.

"Put your hands up!"

He stared at her, his jaw sagging.

"So dat's de lay, is it?" He was mumbling now in a curious puzzled way. "Wot's de likes of youse got to do wid him? He wouldn't travel around wid a thing like youse for a sweetie, an' youse don't look like youse was his mother or his aunt, 'cause youse don't look like nothing at all except a freak dat had been on a bat an' needed a wash."

"Put your hands up!"

For an instant he hesitated, then suddenly reading something in her eyes that decided him abruptly, he hastily lifted his hands above his head.

"Now turn around with your back to me," she ordered curtly, "and keep your hands where they are!"

Again he obeyed her.

The muzzle of her automatic bored into the small of his back. She found his revolver in a holster at his belt, and, removing the weapon, placed it in the pocket of her coat. Then she picked up the candle and stepped back from him.

"You'll need your hands in a moment, so put them down!" She was clipping off her words. "Now turn around, and lead the way to where you've got Phil Martin!"

He swung around, his hands at his sides—and shook his head.

"Youse've got de wrong dope," he said roughly. "Dere ain't no Phil Martin here."

Enid Howard's lips firmed in a hard smile.

"You're a little too late with that, aren't you?" she inquired coldly. "You tacitly admitted a moment ago that he was here. But, in any case, I know that he is a prisoner in the house. Furthermore, I know Izzy Myers and the Big Shot are coming here to-night. I don't know when, but I know I have no time to lose—so you will either take me to him at once, or I shall have to look for him myself."

"Well"—a sneer was creeping over Batty Rose's face—"why don't youse, den?"

"Because," she said, "I have no means of tying you up, and there would be only one alternative. I am a fairly good shot and I think I could disable you enough to answer the purpose without the wounds necessarily proving fatal—but that would be your risk. Will you lead the way or not?"

HE cursed at her now, clenching his fists.

"I believe youse would!" he snarled. "I'd like to get my hands on youse for dis, an' some day I hopes to Gawd I does. Youse'll get wot's—"

"I am going to count three," she said tersely. "One!"

"He's down dere in dat room at de end of de hall, where de door's shut," said Batty Rose hurriedly.

"Lead the way, then, and open the door!"

"Yes, but"—Batty Rose was pleading now—"youse'll put out dat light, won't youse? Dere ain't supposed to be nobody in dis house, an' going along

de hall wid it, somebody might lamp it from de street."

She laughed at him derisively, impatiently.

"I didn't think you were a big enough fool to try to get away with that!" she said. "It doesn't matter to me who sees the light—I want to see you. Now, go ahead!"

For an instant he hung back, glaring at her in vicious rage; and then, muttering savagely under his breath, he stepped out from the recess into the hall and started toward the rear of the house.

Holding the candle above her head, and with her automatic outflung before her, Enid followed him, keeping just far enough in the rear so that he could not whirl upon her unexpectedly.

The candle did not give much light; it cast queer, unearthly shadows. Their footsteps sounded loud and hollow on the bare flooring. Enid's face, under the strain, was set and white. A strange procession, she thought, they must have made here in the shadows and the semidarkness—that hulking figure still raging under his breath as he moved along; and herself with her candle, her automatic, and her grotesque garb!

Batty Rose halted before a closed door.

"He's in here," he flung out over his shoulder surlily; "but the door's locked."

"Unlock it, then!" she ordered levelly. "There is no one but you who would have the key."

"Who said I hadn't?" he snarled. "Gimme a chance!"

She watched him narrowly as he took a key from his pocket and introduced it in the lock. It seemed to stick. Once or twice he turned it ineffectually, grumbling and cursing at it—then suddenly, quick as the wink of an eye, he swung the door inward, leaped through, and slammed it shut behind him.

And with the current of air from

the slamming of the door the candle in Enid's hand flickered and went out.

CHAPTER XI.

GHOSTLY CORRIDORS.

LIKE one dazed and stunned, Enid stood there for a moment motionless in the darkness. She heard Batty Rose's footsteps racing away on the other side of the closed door. And then, impulsively, she flung the door open, and stepped forward.

What was the good of doing that! Batty Rose wasn't here, for now she heard him clattering downstairs, the back stairs obviously, that were reached through what the sense of touch told her was this short, narrow passageway in which she now stood. And Phil, of course, wasn't here either—and never had been!

She moved back into the hall. The bare floors were like sounding boards. She could hear Batty Rose running madly along the lower hall now toward the front of the house. She gave a queer little impotent cry.

Fire down the stairway at him in darkness? What chance would there be of hitting him? She was too late, anyway. She heard him now wrench the basement door to the street open, heard it bang as it was precipitately shut again—and then silence.

She was alone in the house, except for—she choked back a sudden sob in her throat—except for Phil Martin. That door had probably never been locked at all! It wasn't that she had been careless or had ignored the possibility that Batty Rose would attempt to turn the tables on her by whatever means his cunning could devise; but his apparent difficulty with the key had been so natural, and his subsequent plunge through the doorway so swift and unexpected, that she had not realized what had happened until the door stood shut between them. She had been neatly tricked. And now he

was gone—obviously for only one purpose: to communicate with Izzy Myers, or the Big Shot, or some other members of the gang.

How long would it be before some of them were back—enough of them who wouldn't be unarmed the way Batty Rose was now; enough not only to prevent Phil Martin from escaping, but to trap her as well? How long? The words were drumming at her brain. Not very long! She was standing here inactive while the seconds were flying by!

"Phil!" she cried. His Christian name came spontaneously to her lips. "Phil! Where are you?"

There was no answer.

No, of course, there would be no answer! A man who had been gagged couldn't answer—and that was what Izzy Myers had said they had done to Phil. She would have to find him—light the candle again and find him.

But she had no matches.

There must be some somewhere, though. That ledge where Batty Rose kept the candle—there should be matches there!

She dropped her automatic into the pocket of her coat to free her hand, and began to grope her way back along the hall, hurrying as fast as she could, guiding herself by keeping contact with the wall. She reached the recess, and felt hurriedly with her hand along the ledge. Nothing! Again her fingers searched the ledge, anxiously, carefully, inch by inch this time. There were no matches there.

For a moment her heart sank, and a low cry of despair broke from her lips as she set the useless candle down on the ledge. She did not know where else to look. Batty Rose must have taken the match he had used from his own pocket—there were none here.

What was she to do? Even with a light to aid her in her search for Phil, she was not sure she could have won her race against time; but in this pitiless blackness, where she could see nothing, where she could only grope

forward blindly every foot of the way, where she could not even come upon the doors to the rooms except through the sense of touch, it seemed as though all hope of success was ruthlessly, mercilessly swept away. Dismay surged upon her—then fear, an agony of it. What was she to do?

"Try, you little coward!" an inner voice prompted contemptuously. "You'll never find him by standing there! Try! Suppose there are a dozen rooms in the house, how do you know you wouldn't have the luck to find him in the very first one you entered? Try!"

It was like a whiplash, that voice. It spurred her on. She was in instant action.

SHE began to run—with her hand rubbing along the side of the wall. What did it matter if she fell? She must go quickly. There was no time to go any other way, for there were too many rooms to search. There was this floor here, and the one below, and she remembered having seen that there was an upper story when she had inspected the house from the outside.

Phil might be on any one of the three floors—she had nothing to guide her in that respect. She could only begin with the first room she came to, and thereafter take them in turn as long as she had time, or until she found Phil. Her hand would tell her when she came to a door.

Here was one now!

She halted, and her fingers, feeling along the edge of the door near the jamb, sought and found the doorknob. She swung the door wide open, and, in sudden uplift, gave a little cry of relief. It wasn't to be so hopeless after all! Each room wouldn't have to be searched by the sense of touch. It would have taken such endless time to do that.

True, it was still dark and murky, but she could at least see that no one was lying bound there upon the floor. She had forgotten the windows. The

intense blackness in the halls was due to the fact that all the doors of the rooms were closed. Each room would have a window, and, dim and faint as it was, the night light in a windowed room would be like noonday compared with the sense of utter blindness she had experienced before.

And now through this window here she caught the reflection of a street light. This was the front room then—the one whose window she had noticed was just on a level with the stoop at the front entrance. She could go no farther, then, in this direction.

Leaving the door open, as she meant now to leave all the doors open behind her in order to dispel as much of the darkness as possible, she crossed the hall, expecting to find another room opposite the one she had just left—and came instead to the foot of the staircase leading to the upper floor.

She paused then for an instant in indecision. Should she go up or down?

Her hesitation had been more mental than physical, for she had scarcely paused at all. She found herself running up the stairs. Perhaps it was a hint of superstition in her nature that had prompted the decision. There was no other reason—nothing to tell her where Phil was. She had intended to work her way back along the hall, but had found herself confronted by the stairs instead. Perhaps it was meant that she should find the stairs in front of her! The drowning man and the straw, of course! Well, she had grasped at it!

She reached the head of the stairs, and now she was trailing her hand again along the wall in search of a door. A moment more and she had found one. She opened it, and looked inside. Her eyes had grown more accustomed to the darkness now, and it took scarcely a second to assure herself that the room was empty.

On she went again. How long had she been now? She dared not attempt to answer her own question. If she

could only hold the minutes back! What a terrifying noise her footsteps made! The echoes seemed to come from everywhere—as though the house were full of people running frantically about in all directions.

Another door! The same result. And then the end of the hall! And now back again on the opposite side! How many rooms were there? Would she ever be able to search them all? There seemed to be so many!

There couldn't be much time left now. It was certain that Batty Rose would have been able to get into almost instant touch with some of the gang, even if Izzy Myers and Roy were not located. It wouldn't take them long to get here in a car, from, say, their hang-out at Izzy Myers's place. Would she—

ANOTHER door! The hollow echo of her footsteps died away as she halted, groping for the doorknob—and suddenly out of the silence there came a sound that set her heart to beating furiously and her hand to trembling in its frantic haste as it moved across the panels.

Some one was inside there!

The sound was very faint, an almost indefinable sound, just a sound of movement. Oh, where was the doorknob! Suppose—suppose the door was locked? No, it wouldn't be locked. There would have been no object in locking it.

Her fingers touched and closed upon the doorknob, turned it, and the door swung open. And then, while a second passed, she stood upon the threshold, straining her eyes through darkness. Something bulked and took shape and form before her; a man was lying there on the floor.

"Phil!" she cried out almost inarticulately—and the next instant was on her knees beside the figure on the floor. Her hands felt over the man's face—felt over the gag there. She reached then for the knots at the back

of his head, and the man, to aid her efforts, turned with difficulty upon his side. She began to struggle with the knots. They would not seem to yield. Her fingers seemed useless, clumsy things.

It was Phil, of course? It was too dark to see his face, but it must be Phil. What had brought that thought, the possibility that it might be some one else, into her mind! The knots were yielding. She tore the gag away.

"Phil!" she cried again. "It is you, Phil, isn't it?"

"Yes," he spoke with difficulty, thickly. "Yes; but who are you?"

She was feeling over the cords that bound his arms and legs. The knots here frightened her. They were too many and too hard for her fingers.

"Oh, never mind about who I am!" she answered urgently. "Have you got a knife?"

"In my vest pocket—lower right," he said; and then: "I know who you are now. I know your voice. You are—Enid."

"Yes," she said.

A little sob rose chokingly in her throat. He was Phil. She was Enid. She repeated that over to herself. It seemed to have come so naturally to them both. It brought her a strange glow of happiness—and a hurt like that of a knife stab. She must not let herself think about it.

She found the knife, and opening it, began to cut and slash at the cords that bound him.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked eagerly. "How did you find me?"

"There is no time for questions," she told him hurriedly. "Batty Rose will be back at any moment."

The cords around his arms and body were freed now, and he raised himself to a sitting position.

"Batty!" he exclaimed. "Full name Batty Rose, is it! Yes, I know him!" There was a sudden grimness in his voice. "I've a small account to

settle with Batty Rose! He did me the honor of laying me out with a blackjack!"

"Oh!" She drew in her breath sharply.

"So he's gone out, has he? But that doesn't explain how you got in!" His voice was eager again. "I don't understand! How did you know anything about me being here? How could you?"

"Please!" she protested, as she continued to cut desperately at the cords. "Oh, please don't ask questions now. There isn't a moment to spare."

"Well, give me the knife, then," he said. "I'll probably be able to do the rest quicker than you can." He took the knife from her, and, after a moment, spoke again: "All set! Would you mind giving me a boost up? I'm afraid I'm a little stiff—circulation, you know."

"Can you walk?" she asked anxiously as she helped him to his feet.

"Of course I can," he answered cheerily. He took a step forward a little unsteadily, leaning upon her, and then another. "I'm not nearly so bad as I thought I'd be—just cramped a bit. By the time we're downstairs I'll be able to do a sprint; but," his hand was tightening as though in glad possession over hers, "before I go anywhere near so far as that there's something I want to say to you. Enid, no matter how you knew about it, you must have run an appalling risk in coming here—for me. I—"

THERE was a throb in his voice that she dared not, must not listen to.

"You are not to talk about that, either," she interrupted in almost a panic. "We must get out of this house just as quickly as we can. Have you any matches?"

"No; I'm afraid not," he laughed shortly. "As a matter of fact, that's why I'm here!"

"Why you're here?" She checked

herself. There was no time. "Well, it doesn't matter so much now—I mean about the matches," she said hastily. "We'll be able to find our way all right; but with a light, even a match-light, we would have been able to go more quickly, that is all."

Her hand was still in his, still tightly clasped there. He needed to be helped along, he was still none too well able to walk alone. She felt the color flame into her cheeks, and, for the first time that night, was thankful for the darkness. She was a little hypocrite! She withdrew her hand from his resolutely now and substituted it for Batty Rose's revolver, which she took from her coat pocket.

"Take this," she said.

"A rod!" he ejaculated whimsically. He was teasing a little now. "The one of last night?"

Last night! The words seemed to startle her strangely. It couldn't have been last night, could it? Last night was ages and ages away. In another world.

"It belonged to Batty Rose," she said.

His flash of whimsicality was gone. He whistled low under his breath.

"Good God—Batty Rose!" he exclaimed heavily. "I understand less and less of this. I don't get it at all. Enid, what's the answer? You've got to—"

Again she cut him short.

"We're not out of here yet!" she urged wildly. "I don't know how much time is left. I don't know when they'll be back. Don't think of anything else!" She was almost pulling him forward. "Oh, come! Come! Come!"

"All right!" He gave a reassuring little laugh. "I had no intention of putting the brakes on our exit by asking questions; and if you feel that way about it, we'll wait for explanations until we are safely out on the street. Where are the stairs? Can you see at all?"

"No," she replied; "but I know where they are." She led the way gropingly out of the room and across the hall. Out on the street! Yes, she would have to answer questions then! She had only staved them off for a few minutes. What was she going to say to him—out on the street? Her hand came in contact with the stair rail. "Here!" she said. "Feel out for the rail. Have you got it?"

"Yes," he said.

"Well, then, be careful," she cautioned. "Are you sure you can go down all right?"

"I'm as good as ever I was," he assured her. "I wasn't trussed up so very long, you know."

They began to descend the stairs, and near the bottom Phil Martin spoke again as he misjudged a tread.

"Lord, it's black!" he said. "I don't see how you ever found me."

"I was beginning to be afraid I never would," she admitted.

"But you did!"

That throb was in his voice again.

"Yes." She scarcely knew what she was saying. "Keep your hand well ahead of you on the rail. I think there are only two or three more steps. The front door faces the stairs, so keep straight on. It may be locked, but—"

THE words died on her lips, and she stood still as though suddenly riveted to the spot, her face blanching, her fingers clutching tightly at her companion's arm.

From somewhere below, but from quite close at hand, there had come a mocking laugh. And now a voice came jeering out of the darkness:

"Hello, lady, how'd youse like yer little walk? Dem dainty footsteps of yers didn't make no noise at all—so, of course, I didn't know where youse was all de time!"

She knew the voice. But it was incredible. She had not heard any one come into the house.

"Batty Rose!" she exclaimed.

"Sure!" he gloated. "Maybe youse handed me one when youse came in, but maybe youse've got it back again now! Youse thought I went out—but I didn't! D'youse think I was fool enough ever to leave de house an' give youse a chance to make a get-away an' hand a spiel to de police!"

She did not answer for a moment. Phil Martin's lips were pressed close to her ear, his whisper so low that she could barely catch the words:

"Keep him talking!"

The words frightened her a little. What was Phil going to do? He seemed to be crouching down now. She must play up to him, of course! The fact that Batty Rose had not given the alarm did not afford very much relief—some time, now or an hour from now, Izzy Myers and the Big Shot were coming here anyway.

She flung a contemptuous laugh at Batty Rose.

"I don't think you're so very bright!" she said mockingly. "We are two to one, and both of us are armed."

"Is dat so?" he retorted sneeringly. "Well, don't fool yerself dat de rod youse pinched off me was de only one in de house—'cause it wasn't! See? An' youse won't get no chance to use yers, 'cause youse can't hit me where I am. An' maybe"—Batty Rose had obviously been sorely flicked on the raw—"I ain't so bright, but youse can't get to de front-door, or go back along de hall neither, without getting plugged. I've got youse cold, an' if youse makes a move youse gets yers. Youse got dat straight, ain't youse?"

She had located him now. He was inside that front room and protected by the wall at the edge of the doorway, where, as he had said, he could command both the front entrance and enough of the hall to prevent any attempt to reach the rear of the house. Her lips drew suddenly tight together. Phil was gone now, without a sound.

He had thrust his shoes, attached together by their laces, into her hand.

She laughed again, loudly, to drown out the unlucky creaking of some board perhaps, or perhaps a misstep that Phil might make.

"You're a brave man, Batty!" she taunted. "I know where you are. While you're inside the doorway of that front room"—this for Phil's benefit—"you're fairly safe from a shot. But be very, very careful not to expose yourself, won't you?"

"Aw, shut yer map!" he snarled. "I've told youse wot youse'll get if youse makes a move!"

"Yes," she went on with a gibe in her voice, "and if we daren't move and you daren't move, what a pleasant little party it is going to be! Would you mind very much if we sat down on the stairs, since we're going to spend the rest of the night here?"

"Youse can sit down if youse likes—but it won't be for long!" he said viciously. "Youse said yerself dat Izzy Myers and de Big Shot was coming here to-night, but youse won't even have to wait for dem. Dere's some friends of mine dat I was talking to while youse was nosing around de house, dat are on dere way here now on de jump. An', say, wot's de matter wid yer boy friend dat youse does all de talking? Hope nobody pushed that stopper so far into his mouth dat he'll need a doctor—'cause he won't get one

WHERE was Phil? She must keep on talking without the slightest pause, keep Batty Rose talking, keep on distracting his attention from everything but herself.

She raised her voice in well-simulated fury.

"You are a miserable brute!" she cried. "But never mind about him now. I want to tell you that I don't believe one word of what you said about communicating with some of your friends, by which I suppose you mean some of your cowardly gang!"

"Don't yer?"

"No, I don't! The only way you could have done it, since you didn't go out, was to have telephoned—and vacant houses haven't got telephones."

Batty Rose laughed raucously.

"Lady, youse gives me a pain! Maybe dere ain't no number in de telephone book, an' maybe de company don't make no charge, not bein' wise to it; but youse got another guess coming just de same. See? Maybe youse know about tapped wires? Well, dat's wot's wot, an'—"

His words ended abruptly in a curious sort of long-drawn sigh. Came then the thump as of some heavy body falling on the floor, then, for an instant, silence.

While Enid held her breath, waiting, Phil's voice reached her—with just a trickle of grim laughter in its tones:

"You're a peach, Enid! The trick goes to you. I got in a lucky one with the revolver butt. He's out for the next few minutes. Give me my shoes, will you?"

"I—" She found her voice faltering suddenly as she mechanically descended the few remaining stairs, and, groping out toward him, handed him the shoes. Perhaps it was the reaction from suspense, relief from the dread of what might have happened to him that tied her tongue when she wanted to say so much. She clenched her hands tightly. She mustn't let herself go! "I'll get the front door open if I can, while you are putting on your shoes," she said quickly.

"Yes, go ahead!" he agreed.

She made her way to the door and tried it. It was locked, and the key had been taken away. But now she had herself in hand again. She returned then to where she could just dimly make him out as he sat on the floor near the doorway of the front room.

"It's locked," she stated calmly.

"And I suppose the basement entrance will be locked too. I don't know anything about the rear of the house, but there's another way out. It would be an easy drop to the ground from the window in the front room here."

"Good idea!" he applauded. "See if you can unfasten it; if you can't, we'll smash the glass. I'll have this lace tied in a jiffy. Look out you don't trip over Batty Rose—he's lying somewhere inside the doorway."

"I hear him," she said, as the man suddenly began to breathe stertorously.

She entered the room and, guided by the reflection of the street light, went swiftly to the window. She found the catch, unfastened it—and, about to open the window itself, suddenly drew back to one side. An open car, swerving swiftly to the curb, was drawing up just a little beyond the front of the house. And now as she watched, its occupants, two men, two of the gang obviously, for neither of them was Izzy Myers or the Big Shot, got out of the car and came hurrying back toward the house.

"Quick!" she called tensely. "Quick, they're coming now!"

Phil's voice answered her almost from her elbow.

"I see them!" he said coolly. "They'll use the basement entrance, of course—they won't want to be seen on the steps. Yes, there they are under the stoop now!"

She felt him reach out past her to the window. Suppose they rang the bell and stood there waiting for Batty Rose to answer! Well, as an alternative, there were back windows as well as this one! No, they obviously had a key! She heard the basement door open now; and now a voice came hoarsely, excitedly from below:

"Hey, Batty! Batty!"

But the next instant, with the window wrenched open, she had clambered over the sill, and, with Phil following closely, had dropped to the ground.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



"Diamond?" queried Dixey.
 "She looks like a beauty"

Sold—One Diamond

*Tunis Grimshaw and Dixey Red were both prospecting for gold in Alaska
 —but Red hunted it in the earth, while Grimshaw found
 his dust in miners' pockets*

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

THE daily accommodation train jerked and bounced from one way station to the next as it rolled along down the grades from the Kougarok gold fields to Nome. The summer mining season was over. A long series of cold snaps had frozen the creeks, and the miners, deprived of water for their sluice boxes, closed up their camps and were heading for town in increasing numbers. At every stop, men, dog-dirty and clad in khaki, piled into the wheezing local. Several poker games were in progress, and four grizzled old-timers, the huge pockets of their mackinaws sagging with the weight of the moleskin pokes they carried, played solo, silently and for high stakes.

Directly behind the solo players sat Tunis Grimshaw, his carefully tailored appearance in sharp contrast to the rest of the men in the car. He sat alone.

There was an unpleasant coldness in Grimshaw's watery gray eyes, an unhealthy pallor in the sallow skin of his smooth cheeks. His thin lips seemed ready to curl into a nasty sneer and the slight bulge beneath the armpit of his wasp-waisted coat showed plainly that he housed his gun in a shoulder holster.

Tunis stared out of the window. He had a contempt for the rough miners, many of whom he had mulcted of most of their summer's earnings through deft manipulation of the faro bank and

small roulette wheel he had carried through the mining settlements during the summer.

The train ground to a rickety halt at Clifton Creek, and a tall, loose-jointed, pleasant-mannered chap swung aboard. He dragged a heavy bag of camp duffel in one hand. In the other he struggled with a gold pan, a miner's pick, a long-handled shovel, and a paper parcel that contained a couple of cold and soggy flapjacks. Climbing the steps to the car platform was no easy job.

GIVING the lad a friendly boost, the conductor highballed his engine driver, and the local started with a jerk that catapulted young Dixey Red through the door of the smoker.

Dixey sprawled full length down the aisle, landing with a clatter in the midst of his prospecting equipment. A burst of laughter greeted him.

"What's the matter, kid?" roared a prospector.

Dixey slapped his hat on his tousled head and picked himself up carefully.

"Pardner, I always come in that way."

With that he threw his duffel pack up on the baggage rack, piled shovel, pick, and gold pan up there too, and then sat down beside Tunis Grimshaw.

"Seat ain't spoke fer, is it?" he said, making himself comfortable by throwing one long leg over the arm of the seat and dangling it idly.

"No," said the gambler coldly, and edged closer to the window. "It isn't."

For the next few minutes Dixey Red made several attempts to start a casual conversation with the man whose seat he shared. Grimshaw remained cold to these friendly overtures until Dixey, apparently for want of something better to do, dug deep into his pocket and produced a little canvas sack which he hefted tenderly

in the palm of his hand with much evident satisfaction. The sack was unmistakably heavy.

"Know what's in there?" said Dixey, almost thrusting the sack under Grimshaw's hawklike nose. "Gold—yellow gold, mister. Panned it out myself. Prospectin' off the left fork o' Clifton Creek. Got more of it, too, up there in the duffel bag."

He nodded in the direction of the baggage rack, and had he been an observant man he might have noticed the quick glance of interest that Grimshaw shot at him out of the corner of his eye.

The gambler straightened up in his seat. Avarice was born in him. Here, he realized, was a dull-witted clod who had gold, from which he could probably be separated before the train pulled into Nome.

Grimshaw had had a profitable season, and now, he smiled to himself, Fate had thrown into his lap another sucker from whom he could easily pluck himself a handsome little bonus to add to his pile.

"Oh, you've got gold there, eh?" Tunis Grimshaw seemed surprised. "Are you one of the big miners up this way, Mr.—er—"

"Dixey Red," put in the prospector, adding modestly: "Shucks, no, I ain't a big shot. Just one o' the small fry. Cleaned up about five or six thousand, though. You a minin' man?"

"No, I'm not," Grimshaw said guardedly.

"Uh-uh," Dixey grinned pleasantly. "Thought mebbe you wasn't."

For a moment Grimshaw froze. His lips tightened. He wondered if this lad from the hills was trying to kid him. Then he laughed the thought aside as foolish.

DIXEY was still smiling, with not a trace of guile in his frank weather-tanned face, not the faintest sign of suspicion in his eyes. Yet he said nothing for some time, and

the silence seemed to Grimshaw awkward.

It was the gambler who resumed conversation. "Like to play cards? Just a friendly little game."

"Naw," said Dixey with disgust. "I ain't got no head fer figurin' or rememberin' the cards as is out. Takes a smart man to play cards."

"I could teach you easily," said Grimshaw quickly. Then, afraid he might have sounded too eager, he added: "That is, if you'd care to learn."

"Naw," replied Dixey, putting his sack of gold back in his pocket. "I don't want to learn. Besides, I'm too dumb. Just like my brother. A feller was goin' to teach him to play once. My brother got rooked proper, too—the guy turned out to be one of them professional gamboleers. Dirty skunks, them fellers, always rookin' somebody."

Grimshaw's gray eyes suddenly turned to twin pools of ice. He thrust his hand under his coat and had almost whipped out his gun, when all the calculating craft and cunning of his trade came back to him.

Dixey was still smiling blandly, unaware of the hate that blazed out at him from the gambler's eyes.

When Tunis pulled his hand out of his jacket again it held two black cigars.

"Have a smoke?" he said, offering one of the stogies to Dixey. "You're right," he went on smoothly. "I don't care much for professional card sharps myself."

Dixey bit off the end of his cigar and fumbled in his pockets for a match. "Got a light?"

The gambler pulled a box of wax vestas out of his waistcoat. As he did so something white and flashing fell from his pocket and rolled under the seat.

"You dropped something," said Dixey.

Grimshaw bent over to recover his

property. He picked it up and held it glittering in the light for a brief second.

"Diamond?" queried Dixey. "She looks like a beauty."

"Looks pretty, doesn't it?" Grimshaw started to put the stone back in his pocket. "It isn't worth much, though."

"Ain't worth much?" repeated Dixey, astonished at the gorgeous play of colors in the gem. "Looks like a blue-white. Guess you kin get five thousand for it any day."

Grimshaw laughed out loud. "Five thousand! Lucky if I could get five hundred. It's not genuine. Only paid four hundred for it."

"Give you five hundred for it right now," said Dixey suddenly.

"No, I'd be robbing you. It isn't real, I tell you."

Dixey looked at the stone eagerly. "I'll give you a thousand dollars for that stone, fake or no fake. She's a peach."

Grimshaw shook his head. "What's the use? I don't want to gyp you."

"I'll make it fifteen hundred," persisted Dixey. "I'm a mining man, an' I know diamonds. Sold, is it?"

Grimshaw hesitated. He clutched the stone in his fist and half-heartedly pushed Dixey away from him. "Not so fast, young fellow. I don't want any come-back on this deal if you pay good money for the thing. Understand that. I've told you I don't think it's worth much."

"Mebbe it ain't," said Dixey slowly, "but I'll back my judgment. Give us the stone. Here's the money."

G RIMSHAW breathed easier, but he was not yet ready to hand over the diamond.

"Wait till we put it in writing that I'm selling you a stone I think is a fake."

"O. K.," said Dixey. "Write it out."

Grimshaw drew a piece of paper and

a gold-trimmed fountain pen from his inside pocket. When the agreement was drawn up, Dixey signed it willingly. Grimshaw added his signature to the paper, and then asked the conductor to sign as a witness just to make sure everything was according to Hoyle.

"Lemme see the stone once more," said Dixey slowly.

Grimshaw shrugged his shoulders and passed the gem over. Two seconds later he took it back and held it in his hand.

Dixey handed the gold over, but when he went to reach for the stone the train gave a sudden lurch that sent the diamond flying out of Grimshaw's hand.

Both men saw it flash as it rolled under the seat.

Grimshaw bent down quickly to pick it up.

"Naw, not this time," growled Dixey, shoving him roughly aside. "I'll pick it up myself."

He stooped over and fumbled for the diamond. Suddenly he felt something cold and hard pressing down on the small of his back. He heard Grimshaw snarl: "No, you don't, either! Leave it there. I'll pick it up. Thought you were a wise guy, didn't you?"

Dixey had his hand on the coveted diamond. He didn't look up. He could feel the weight of Grimshaw's body leaning on him, pretending to be searching for the stone, and protecting from the view of those in the car the revolver that was boring into his back. Dixey shifted uneasily. His feet were close to Grimshaw's legs. Quietly he drew them up close to his body.

"Leave that stone there!" repeated Grimshaw.

"All right," replied Dixey, and he kicked his feet out like an army mule. His heavy boots caught the gambler just below the shins and sent him toppling into the aisle, so unexpected had been the attack.

There was a shot. Dixey felt a sting of pain crease along his left shoulder. The next instant he was up, and he lunged at Grimshaw with the fury of a maddened bull. With a wrench that nearly broke Grimshaw's wrist he wrested the gambler's gun away from him. Then he jerked the man's head up with one hand and crashed his fist into the cavern of Grimshaw's gaping mouth. There was the tinkle of teeth rolling in the aisle, and Grimshaw choked on his own blood.

For a brief moment pandemonium reigned in the car until the rest of the passengers were able to pry the fighters apart. Dixey, puffing and blowing, strained at the men who held his arms. Grimshaw stood weakly by, swaying unsteadily on his feet.

ONE of the passengers saw something flashing on the car floor, and picked it up. He handed it to Dixey. "Here," he said, "is this diamond what you guys were fightin' over?"

"Naw." Dixey looked at the man in disgust. "That ain't the one. That's the fake he was goin' to palm off onto me when he dropped the other on the floor. See?"

He opened his clenched fist, and there in the middle of his hand lay the dazzling, brilliant diamond.

"Here's the good one. The one he showed me all along." Dixey looked ruefully at the damp bloodstains on his shoulder.

Grimshaw, held tight in the grasp of a couple of burly miners, was still gasping for breath. "How in blazes did you know I was going to palm the good stone and slip you a phony?"

Dixey smiled pleasantly. "Because, wise guy, I told you I was too dumb to play cards, just like my brother done once. Then the card sharp sold him a diamond thataways. They're all dirty skunks, them card sharpers, ain't they now, Mr. Grimshaw?"



The last Viking ship had passed them by!

The Radio Flyers

Snatched from the workaday world and plunged into the mysteries of the land inside the earth, explorer Eric Redmond finds a Viking sweetheart and weird adventures aplenty

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Author of "The Radio Man," "The Radio Beasts," and "The Radio Planet"

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MYSTERIOUS radio messages, which seem to come from underground to the northward, are fully received at last by means of underground antennæ. They tell of the secret polar expedition sent by the Milwaukee *Eagle*. Eric Redmond and Angus Selkirk, war flyers, head the expedition, which started in the ship Coolidge, for the Greenland coast in 1925. They establish a base, then the two of them start out in their plane, on May 2, 1926, racing the Byrd and Amundsen expeditions.

A leak in the gas line forces them to land, and the irregular ice smashes one ski and the propeller blade. Eric takes blankets and food, and starts on a brief reconnoitering trip. When he returns—and he is sure of the berg be-

side which they landed—both Angus and the crippled plane are gone. Eric presses on toward the pole. Nearing it, he gets adrift on an iceberg, which carries him, as he thinks, across the pole and down the other side of the world. Here everything is strange—a fixed sun directly overhead, tropical warmth, an upward-curving horizon. At last he figures it out—the world is hollow, with a central "sun"; and he has gone over the edge, at the polar orifice.

His iceberg melts, and he swims to an island, where he finds a girl with long golden braids. She speaks an ancient form of some Scandinavian tongue, and he manages to converse in Swedish. She is Helga Uppri, descendant of the first bishop who came there from Greenland.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for May 11.

Suddenly she is snatched from sight by a group of "skraelings"—the old Viking term for Eskimos. After a fight with a red-haired mammoth—an "*umpnah*"—Eric manages to rescue her from the skraelings, and they flee to a plateau, accessible only through a narrow, chimneylike tunnel with a slab blocking it at the top. She tells how Goovah, chief of the skraelings, wants her for his son Altoonah; Helga's cousin, Bror Høglund, who covets Goovah's daughter Astroo, had her kidnaped by the skraelings. Goovah's family have some Viking blood in them, and Astroo is blond; but it is forbidden for Vikings to marry skraelings.

While Eric is sleeping Helga is carried off by a *skwaa*, a huge leathery bird. Eric wakes at the sound of an airplane; it is Angus, who has repaired the plane—blown away in a snow-storm—and has come in search of him. They set out, Eric afoot and Angus in the plane, in search of Helga. Angus, finding a skraeling village, mistakes Astroo for Eric's description of Helga, and carries her off. The plane runs out of gas, and Angus, abandoning it, proceeds afoot with Astroo for the plateau. Helga, who has slain the *skwaa*, returns; and the four of them reach the tunnel just ahead of the skraelings. Helga is wounded by a spear.

The besieging skraelings are piling brush in the chimney, planning to overheat and crack the slab of slate that bars their way; and the defenders prepare boiling water.

CHAPTER XIV (Continued).

THE SIEGE OF THE PLATEAU.

"HERE goes!" shouted Angus. The skraelings looked up in surprise.

"One, two, three!"

And with one accord Eric and Angus emptied their three buckets of

scalding water down the chute onto the upturned faces. The effect was superb! Bedlam was let loose as the howling natives tumbled together to the bottom, where they writhed like worms in a can, those underneath letting out even louder roars of pain as the pressure of those on top forced their burns against the sharp bushes. The struggling of those below threw those above out of the cleft and onto the tops of the bushes, where the sharp twigs added to their agony.

The sudden and complete change from their stealthy conspiracy to burn out the top of the chute, to their loud and agonized antics in the monkey-pile at the bottom, was ludicrous in the extreme.

"I hope it will teach them a lesson," remarked Angus. "Can't we find some rocks and do this thing up brown?"

A hasty search was made of the vicinity, but it developed only one large rock—so large, in fact, that it took both of them to lift it. That is probably why Helga hadn't added it to her store long ago, for it seemed that she had combed the summit of all others. This rock the two men lifted high and dropped with a splintering crash upon the sticks wedged at the top of the chute. The sticks gave way and the whole mass crashed to the bottom.

The bedlam redoubled. Cries of surprise. Shrieks of pain as some of the skraelings made their painful escape over, through, or under the bushes. Groans from one skraeling who lay with his leg pinned by the sticks and stone. And one other skraeling also lay beneath the wreckage, but motionless and silent. Out on the plain many were running in circles, with their hands over burned and sightless eyes, while their unhurt comrades, who had been on the outside at the time of the catastrophe, clustered around them with much jabbering, seeking to learn just what had happened.

"That ought to teach them a lesson," remarked Angus.

They replaced the slab and turned toward the two girls. Astroo showed her teeth in a broad grin. Helga had been awakened by the noise, but did not seem to grasp what was going on. She recognized Eric, however, and smiled at him faintly.

It was decided to take advantage of her awakening and carry her to the stone village, and this was accordingly done. There she drank some nourishing broth and slept again.

The sight of the *agunta* bones recalled to Eric the remark which Angus had made just before they repelled the skraelings.

"Why did you call that horse-meat?" he asked.

"Because it is," replied his friend. "That's as pretty a specimen of prehistoric horse as any in the American Museum of Natural History."

"But it has five toes," objected Eric. "Who ever heard of a horse with five toes?"

"I have," replied Angus. "Don't you know the poem:

"The little eohippus was
No bigger than a fox,
And on five toes he scampered
Over Tertiary rocks."

"Well, this may be a horse," Eric reluctantly admitted; "but it tastes more like a rabbit, so I'm not going to worry any."

ASTROO and Angus fitted up two of the remaining stone huts of the village for their quarters. Plans were then made for the care of the invalid and for guarding the plateau.

Each of the three was to watch beside Helga for two hours at a stretch by Angus's wrist watch, which Eric had been wearing and which was the sole remaining timepiece of the party. The two men had considerable difficulty in explaining the significance of this instrument to Astroo by signs, but finally succeeded.

Sleeping, trapping, gathering fruit and roots, and cooking, were to be done by each during the four-hour periods between watches. Doubtless the system of "two on, and four off" was largely influenced by the men's army experience.

At the end of each watch the person relieved was to walk to the cliff and see what the skraelings were doing.

So the plan was put into effect. For quite a number of watches each of the exhausted three slept nearly all the time that he or she was off duty. Eric particularly was in need of this rest, for many of the spear-pricks which he had received during his brief captivity by the skraelings on the plateau began to fester, and he too developed a fever which threatened to put him in a class with Helga, as a problem on their hands. But this fever quickly abated under the influence of certain medicinal leaves which Astroo mashed and applied to his cuts.

The same herbs were applied to the gaping wound in Helga's shoulder and to the marks of the *skwaa's* claws, but with less effect. For awhile she improved, but later her fever mounted and she lay delirious for watch after watch, while the person on duty bathed her continually with cold water. They did not think that they could pull her through.

Eric was frantic. It was all that the others could do to keep him from tiring himself out with taking more than his share of the watches.

"But," he remonstrated, "Helga is mine. I love her, and she has said that she loves me. My place is by her side." And even when they succeeded in keeping him away he merely mooned around, was not much good at work, and refused to sleep.

Meanwhile the skraelings kept away from the chute, and even permitted Angus one day to go down unmolested and retrieve his rifle.

As he tersely put it, "A scalded skraeling shuns the hot water." The

skraelings, however, did spread a cordon around the entire foot of the plateau, establishing camps at intervals, as more and more of them arrived. It soon became quite evident that a state of siege was being instituted. But the three on the top, feeling perfectly secure in their impregnable fortress, were more worried over Helga's rapid decline than they were over any menace from the enemy.

One thing which complicated their relations was the lack of a common language. When they had had Helga, their linguistic attainments had overlapped. The two men could talk together in English, Eric and Helga could speak Norse, and the two girls could talk in the skraeling tongue. But now the illness of Helga caused a gap in the chain.

Half in jest and half in earnest, Angus said: "I think I shall teach Astroo Esperanto." When this was frowned on, he suggested that the two of them teach her English.

But Eric objected: "It would be better for me to teach both of you to speak Norse, and for her to teach both of us some skraeling, for those languages are the only speech of this central world. English would be of no practical use to the girl, and if she acquires that means of communication with us it will slow up our learning something really useful. Norse is the most important to us, so we must start with that."

AFTER many sleeps Helga reached and survived the crisis of her illness, and the fever abated. A thin and wan maiden began to convalesce. Although she would always carry a jagged and unsightly scar above her left breast, yet it would be effectively hidden by the shoulder strap of her leopardskin garment, and so would not mar her beauty.

With her convalescence the instruction of Angus and Astroo in the Norse language progressed more rap-

idly. Eric also was able to perfect his speech.

One day Astroo returned from a trip of inspection to the cliff, and reported that her people had got up sufficient courage to be scouting around at the bottom of the chute again. In broken Norse, with some assistance by Eric and Helga, Angus outlined to Astroo a plan of action, and then he and she set out for the cliff, he carrying a rifle. There she hailed her countrymen in their own tongue.

Shouting to them, so that her words might carry clear down from the heights, she said: "Go where you will about the foot of this plateau, and we shall not molest you. But to approach this cleft in the rocks is death."

A native, stepping forward, shouted: "We Innuits go where we please."

Astroo translated this into halting Norse, and Angus neatly dropped the braggart with a bullet.

"Repeat," he commanded.

So Astroo called down once more: "To approach this cleft in the rocks is death. Do you understand?"

Angus raised his gun menacingly.

Another spokesman stepped forward. "We understand," he cried dismally. Hastily the natives withdrew.

Helga gained rapidly. Life on the plateau settled down to a peaceful routine. Except for the constant menace of the besieging army, it would have been idyllic.

Why were they besieged, anyhow? Each of the party naturally took most of the blame—or credit—to himself or herself.

Helga figured that Astroo's father, Goovah, who had once demanded that Helga be given in marriage to his son Altoonah, was trying to recapture her for that purpose.

Astroo was certain, however, that if word could be got to her father, he would call off the siege and would mete out punishment to those who had annoyed his daughter. She blamed Helga's traitorous cousin Hoglund for

the trouble, and felt sure that he was lurking in the background, directing operations and awaiting an opportunity to claim her as his bride or his slave.

The two men feared that the girls might be right, but attributed the siege in part to the resentment that the savages felt for the many deaths and other indignities inflicted upon them. To find out who was right, they all went to the cliff edge one day, and the skraeling girl addressed her countrymen:

"Why do you annoy us?"

A spokesman from below replied: "We shall never rest until we have the two women in our clutches."

"And what do you plan to do with us?"

Said the native: "You are to be brought before your father for punishment for treason to your tribe. The other is to be turned over to your brother, Altoonah, to do with as he wills."

"Does my father know of this?" Astroo demanded imperiously.

"Yes."

"You lie!"

"Then, if you know so much, why do you ask us?"

Thereat she took a new line and asked: "If you get us women, will you leave the men alone?"

"Yes. All we want is you. The men are beneath our contempt."

"Will one woman do?" Astroo inquired.

Helga translated. Eric stepped angrily forward. Did Astroo plan to betray his Helga?

CHAPTER XV.

THE PLAGUE OF SKWAAS.

BUT Astroo silenced him with "Fool, I mean myself! Let me surrender myself to my people, that you may have peace."

Then it was Selkirk's turn to be

angry. Throwing one arm around his girl, he shouted in Norse, as though the enemy could understand that language: "Never, while there is one drop of blood left in Angus Selkirk!"

Astroo understood, and smiled up into his eyes. "My brave elephant-face," she murmured.

Turning again toward her people, she let forth a perfect torrent of untranslatable billingsgate.

The parley was at an end. They returned to the stone village. Gradually a new trouble arose to plague them. Flocks and flocks of dirty *skwaas*. Thousands of these unclean reptilian bats congregated. The "rock of the *skwaa*," that high black pinnacle which projected from the otherwise level surface of the plateau, became a swarming rookery. Doubtless these carrion-scavengers had first been attracted by the dead elephant and the trampled skraelings, and then had been maintained and augmented by the offal of the camps of the besiegers.

Among these swarms of pterodactyls Eric half expected to find at least one of the size and kind which had abducted Helga. But they were all alike, about as large as buzzards.

Just because a man had once seen or heard a condor or a roc on the outer earth, ought he expect to find one or more of these huge birds in every gathering of crows from then on? There are hundreds of species of birds on the outer earth, and each species flocks by itself. Doubtless the same was true of the winged lizards of the prehistoric past and of this central world. Eric reached the conclusion that "*skwaa*" was a generic, rather than a specific, word. But his speculations did not contribute toward removing the nuisance.

"Something must be done quickly," said Angus, with a look of dour determination. "Even aside from the unpleasantness of it, they will bring germs to the plateau."

So he set snares of golden hair,

which Astroo willingly furnished him. The traps he baited with the entrails of one of the little *aguntas*. The *skwaas* which he caught he hung from the tops of poles, as a farmer does with shot crows, to warn away others of their kind. But this had exactly the opposite effect upon the pterodactyls, which lit upon the poles and feasted on the dead bodies of their fellows.

Accordingly the Scot was forced to change his tactics, and use the dead for bait to catch the living. Many more snares were set. Soon hundreds of *skwaas* per day were falling a victim to his endeavors, and the numbers flying about the black pinnacle began to diminish perceptibly.

WITH the two men's interest in aviation, they naturally were intrigued by the method of flight of these aërial reptiles. It was interesting to compare their wing-structure with that of a bird and a bat.

In a bird, the arm is in three sections like that of a man, but the fingers are welded together into a single trussed bone which is almost as long as the forearm. The two joints of the wing occur at the elbow and the wrist.

In a bat, the four fingers are greatly elongated, and spread downward from the wrist-joint, supporting the leathery wing-membrane like the ribs of an umbrella. The thumb alone is free. The membrane extends to the ankles and tail-tip, and there is no separate tail for steering.

In a pterodactyl, only the little finger is elongated to hold the membrane, which in other respects is like that of a bat. The outer joint of the arm occurs at the point where in man the palm of the hand joins the fingers, rather than at the wrist as in birds and bats. The wrist is halfway between this joint and the elbow, and is not bendable. There is no thumb, but the first three fingers are free, and serve the same purpose as the bat's thumb, for holding on.

Some birds flutter and some soar, and some do both. All bats flutter. But pterodactyls, or at least that particular variety common to this part of the underworld, soar exclusively, except for a few lazy leathery flaps in starting their flight.

One day Selkirk returned from a *skwaa* hunt, and announced: "I'm going to make a glider."

"Out of what?" asked Redmond, with immediate interest.

"Split bamboo," was the answer.

"But what can you use for wing covering?"

"*Skwaa* skin. We might just as well put these hundreds of carcasses to some use other than merely for bait to catch other hundreds with."

Eric offered a suggestion: "Did you ever make one of those little soaring toys, those stringless kites that fly directly into the wind by the mere force of the wind itself? We used to make them as boys in Minnesota. Got the idea out of some book or magazine. You take a rectangular piece of paper and curl one of its long edges down in nearly a half-circle. You shellac it, so that it will hold its shape. Then you hang a light weight from it at the converging ends of three pieces of rattan. You hold it with the curved edge toward the wind and let go. Somehow or other, the wind curls up under the curved edge and actually pushes it into the wind. Of course, it drifts with the wind a bit, but it keeps on going up, until some gust swings it around and it capsizes. If there were only some way to keep it headed into the wind, it would go on forever."

"I doubt it," remarked his friend. "As soon as it is off the ground, relative motion between it and the air is all that counts. Unless your little glider is moving relative to the air, the day might just as well be windless, so far as any good the wind can do."

"Then why does it fly at all?" asked Eric.

"The same reason that your drift-

meter worked, after the scientists gave you all that song and dance about relative motion. Like a plane carrying your drift-meter, the glider starts from rest. Its inertia—that property of a body at rest which tends to resist putting it into motion—acts just like a string of a kite, holding it against the wind. But gradually, as the wind speeds it up, the pull of this imaginary string would get less and less, until, when your little machine is finally traveling as fast as the wind, there would be no more relative motion to hold it up, and it would flop.”

“I see,” said Eric. “It’s just as though a boy, flying a kite, were to start letting the string out faster and faster, until he was finally letting it out as fast as the wind itself. Then the kite would fall.”

“There is this slight difference, however,” Angus added. “When your glider starts to fall, the upward pressure of the air will force it forward again into the wind, thereby restoring some of the relative motion; not enough to keep it from falling, but enough to delay its descent considerably.”

“LET’S make one,” suggested Eric. “It will amuse the girls.” It was no more near his real reason than is it true when a father says he is taking the children to see the circus for *their* enjoyment.

But the girls entered thoroughly into the spirit of the game. To tell the truth, time was beginning to hang heavy on their hands. Half the fun of being in love lies in doing things together, and housework and language lessons do not exactly supply this want. The first glider which they made was about six feet from tip to tip. The two girls skinned the *skwaas* and tanned the hides, while the men split the bamboo and carefully fitted together the framework.

The girls had become very friendly, almost chummy, although Helga still

stoutly maintained that their real relationship was that of mistress and slave, and that this was the only possible relationship that could exist between the daughter of the Christian bishop of the Norsemen and a member of an inferior race. Yet it was hard to believe that the fair-haired, blue-eyed Astroo had a single drop of skraeling blood. Eric and Angus often remarked, as they watched the two girls at work or at play together, that they looked enough alike to be sisters.

“It’s all right, Angus,” Eric once remonstrated with his friend, “for you to love and even marry an Eskimo girl, especially when she looks exactly like a white person; but the children may revert to the ancestral type. Think of being the father of a lot of yellow brats like those we saw in the settlement at Disco Bay!”

Angus did ponder on this a great deal, but the sight of the beautiful Astroo herself always blotted out these thoughts.

He also pondered considerably on his future with this girl whom he loved. He wanted her for his wife, but where was there one who could unite them in marriage? Helga had described her father as a “bishop”; perhaps he would do. But how could they reach Helga’s father?

He asked her. She seemed sympathetic, but a bit amused.

Said she: “Astroo is a skraeling. No marriage is necessary among them, though it is sometimes practiced by the chiefs when they wish to put on airs. Hence Altoonah’s flattering offer to marry me.”

“But I am a Christian,” objected Angus.

“If you are a Christian and a Viking, which means the same thing,” Helga replied, “then you cannot marry a skraeling. Even to look on one with pleasure is punishable by death.”

“Perhaps I may have to turn

skraeling," he announced, somewhat threateningly.

The girl hastened to soothe him.

"There, there!" said she. "Eric and I have the same problem. We too must reach my people in order to wed properly."

"Let the four of us stay together. I am sure that a way can be found out of our difficulties."

Somewhat mollified, Angus returned to his work.

When the wings of the glider were completed, various weights and positions of weights were tried, until the greatest possible pulling power was developed. The air currents would actually snatch it out of their hands, and pull it into the very teeth of the wind for a few minutes, until it gained upward momentum. Then it would rise and gradually begin to drift back with the wind as it ascended. But, at just about this time, something would usually upset it and it would spin end over end to the ground.

"What keeps an airplane from doing that?" asked Eric. "It must be the tail. The tail must act like a weathervane on a barn, keeping the nose of the plane always headed into the wind, only the plane has no pivot like that of a weathervane."

"It pivots about its center of gravity," explained Angus, "that being where all its inertia is centralized. When the tail dips too low the wind strikes against its under side and lifts it. When the tail rises too high, the wind strikes against its upper side and depresses it. Similarly when the tail swings to one side or the other."

SO they put a tail on the glider, which was thus enabled to keep head-on into the wind. Selkirk's prophecy was fulfilled; the glider now flew until it lost all its initial inertia and began to drift as fast as the wind. Then it settled slowly to earth again. But although it no longer pitched or yawed, it rolled considerably, fre-

quently even twisting clear over upside down and dashing to the ground.

"Airplanes don't do this," remarked Eric. "Why not?"

Angus pondered awhile, picturing his plane in his mind. Then he scratched a diagram on the ground with a stick.

"I think it's this way," he said. "The wings of a plane are set at a slight V. When the plane tips, this tipping lengthens the horizontal distance from the fuselage to the tip of the wing that's down, and shortens this distance with respect to the other wing. Result: a greater upward lift on the wing that's down; and so the craft rights itself. Let's try that on our glider."

So they tilted the wings slightly upward, and found to their delight that the glider no longer rolled, but they found that the tilting of the wings rendered the machine more susceptible to the overturning effect of side-gusts. No way occurred to them of avoiding this new difficulty, which, however, was not very serious.

Then they set about building a larger machine with a twenty-foot span. And in this one the men by turns substituted their bodies for the weights. In general, they were quite successful, and found that they could even steer the craft to some extent, up, down, and sidewise, by throwing their bodies back, forward, or to one side.

One or two bad spills convinced them that it was dangerous to fly in a high wind. Yet high wind was necessary, in order to get the glider to rise off the ground at all. They were at an impasse.

They attempted to solve it by making a ladder to a high ledge on the rock of the *skvaa* and a block and tackle to hoist their glider up to this ledge. For rope they used the leather pieces which Eric had saved from his captivity, and others, braided from *agunta* hide. But this proved to be not nearly enough.

Where could they turn for still more rope?

ONE day Eric and Helga, who was now almost fully recovered, were scouting through a little wood on a part of the plateau they seldom visited. Eric had his rifle, as they had become very tired of *agunta* meat, and hoped to find some other sort of game for variety. Although they carefully conserved their small remaining store of ammunition, yet it would be worth the expenditure of one or two cartridges to secure a change in their diet.

In some bushes ahead of them near the edge of the cliff they saw a large animal moving, so Eric lay down behind a log and covered the bush with his rifle, bidding the girl circle like a rabbit-dog to one side of the bush, and then flush their quarry.

Helga accordingly crept quietly around between the thicket and the cliff, and then rose suddenly and rushed toward the bushes with much loud shouting.

Eric trained his gun on the other side of the thicket, so as to be ready for the frightened animal when it should rush out. But it rushed out toward Helga, rather than away from her! And it was not in the least frightened.

Eric's attention was on the spot where he had expected the animal to emerge. But his attention was suddenly diverted by Helga's scream. Swinging quickly around, he saw a huge black gorilla, seven feet at least in height, bounding over the ground on all fours toward the terrified girl.

He fired, but his shot appeared to have no more effect on the beast than an air rifle. Before he could get off a second shot, the beast had reached the girl, and Eric did not dare to fire again for fear of hurting her. So, springing up, he rushed to closer quarters. He had the gorilla cornered at the edge of the cliff, and felt confident

that he could dispatch him in a moment.

But the gorilla, without even a backward glance at Eric, seized Helga with one hairy arm and disappeared over the edge!

CHAPTER XVI.

FLIGHT.

ERIC ran at top speed to the edge of the cliff, over which the huge anthropoid had disappeared with Helga in his arms. He looked down, fully expecting to see both lying crushed at the bottom.

But instead, the gorilla was safely climbing down a rope ladder, with the girl slung across his shoulder. Near the bottom of the ladder several skraeling warriors were rapidly descending. At the foot of the cliff were about twenty more natives, cheering the beast on, and shouting directions. At the summit where Eric stood, there was a tangled pile of rope, one end of which was attached to the top of the ladder.

Eric took in the situation at a glance. It was evident that some master mind among the besiegers had sent this intelligent animal up the cliff with a rope, which the beast had used to haul up the ladder after him.

When the ladder had been secured, a storming party had started stealthily up, only to be interrupted by the shot and the sudden appearance of their animal ally at the top with his captive. Instantly their plans had changed. The shot had apprised them that they were discovered, so they were now hastening down for two reasons: first, to get out of range of the rifle; and, secondly, to leave the way clear for as rapid a descent as possible by the ape.

The girl's body shielded most of the gorilla's anatomy, so that Eric did not dare to fire; but he drew a careful bead, and waited for an opening.

All the skraelings reached the bottom, and scattered. The anthropoid was halfway down with his prey when he stopped suddenly and groped for the rope with the hand that had hitherto held Helga. Evidently the shot, some time back, which Eric thought had missed, was beginning to tell.

"Grab the ladder!" shouted Eric in Norse.

Helga heard and heeded. Although her head was toward her captor's back, away from the ladder, she reached behind her and managed to clasp one of the rungs. The beast glared at her and bared his fangs, then clutched at his heart with his left hand.

This move unbalanced him slightly, so that he swung clear of the girl. Eric fired again, and the beast toppled to the ground. Helga hung perilously by one hand for a moment, but finally managed to get her feet and the other hand placed. There she clung and covered.

"Climb back! Climb back!" called Eric, but she had no strength left.

The skraelings, fearing that they were to lose their prey, rushed toward the foot of the ladder again. One of them reached it, and started shaking it. It was evident that Helga could not stand much of this.

Eric fired, and put an end to the shaking. The rest of the natives, seeing the death of their fellow, recoiled for an instant. There was no time to be lost.

"Climb! Climb!" urged Eric, but the poor girl could only cling and cower.

So, dropping his rifle, Eric started hauling in on the ladder, hand over hand. The skraelings rushed forward again, but it was too late. The bottom of the ladder swung to and fro just out of their reach.

Taking his time a bit more now, Eric pulled up the ladder some further, until its bottom was at a safe distance above the heads of the enemy. Then, lashing it firmly to a jagged

rock at the top of the cliff, he swung himself over the edge, and descended to get Helga, who, with shattered nerves, still clung to the ladder and refused to budge, despite his urgings.

The enemy below, noting that he had left his rifle behind, clustered underneath the waving end of the ladder and started throwing things. What could they hope to gain by this? Helga was clearly out of range.

But the bottom of the ladder was not out of range. Soon a stone, with a leather thong attached, passed between two of the lower rungs, and in an instant the natives, ahold of both ends of this cord, were violently shaking the ladder again.

It was all that Eric could do to hold on. And what of Helga?

Suddenly a shot rang out from above. One of the enemy toppled, and the rest let go the rope. A clear voice from the top of the cliff sang out a command and a warning in the native tongue, and the enemy slunk away. It was Angus and Astroo, arrived just in time.

Eric continued his descent, reached Helga, calmed her hysterics, and assisted her upward to safety. On their gaining the top, Astroo took Helga into her arms, while Eric explained to Angus what had occurred.

When he had finished, Angus said: "We heard your shots. The interval between them somehow suggested trouble, so she and I hurried to join you."

"It's lucky you had that hunch," said Redmond.

Selkirk continued: "Some one with more brains than these natives is pulling the strings. If he had not felt it necessary to keep out of sight, I am afraid that it would have taken a good many more shots of mine to have stopped that giant-swing performance."

They were all very much shaken up by the episode, but not so much so but

what they had the good sense to pull up the ladder, so that the skraelings could not use it again.

When they suddenly realized that this ladder would supply all the rope that they needed, and more than enough to complete their projected block and tackle at the rock of the *skwaa*, their poise was almost completely restored. But, even so, it took a long rest, and a meal and a sleep, before they were able to go on with the work.

The tours of watch duty, which had been discontinued with Helga's recovery, were instituted again, but now the guard walked around and around the edge of the cliff instead of merely sitting up with a sick person. No more monkeys, however, attempted the ascent.

Fortunately there was no danger of the enemy creeping up on them during the night; for there is no night in that weird world of the central sun, but instead always noonday for ever and ever.

When the derrick was completed they found that they could launch their motorless plane from the ledge in almost motionless air. By taking advantage of shifting wind and rising currents, they could fly for quite a few minutes before dropping to the surface of the plateau. Of course they took great pains never to fly beyond the edge unless they were at a sufficient altitude to insure not missing the plateau on coasting back again.

Controls were now added, as in a plane: ailerons, rudder, and elevators. Instead of balancing on his hands on a trapeze bar, the pilot now had a seat provided for him. Their craft had developed until it was practically a standard monoplane, except for having no motor. They found that the ailerons enabled them easily to counterbalance the upsetting effect of side gusts, which had been the only danger against which their craft was not automatically stabilized.

Taking advantage of all that they had learned, they built a still larger ship. In this one they arranged for the occupant to lie down, instead of sitting, thus getting rid of about three square feet of air resistance. Many races were held with the two man-carrying gliders, and the men became quite proficient navigators. Only the giving out of the supply of *skwaas*, on whose tissue-thin leather they depended for wing covering, kept them from building a third and even more pretentious glider.

Helga's unfortunate flight in the claws of a real *skwaa* was now sufficiently far in the past, so that she wished to learn to fly one of these machines, and therefore Eric undertook her instruction. But Astroo, although she enjoyed watching and helping the others, could not be induced to try it herself.

Helga made rapid progress, and in the better plane was soon a match for either of the men in the other one.

THE investing army of skraelings had been ominously quiet for some time, which made them fear that the master mind, whoever he might be, was cooking up some new devilment. But Helga, it appeared, was due to get into trouble again on her own hook, without any assistance from the leader of the enemy.

One day she sailed in her glider too far beyond the plateau, and, as she floated back toward it a sudden lull in the wind dropped her farther than she had calculated. Perhaps she could have just barely made it; but she was unable to nerve herself to take the chance of dashing against the face of the cliff, so she turned and swung off again over the fields below, hoping to make altitude, and then return.

The winds were favorable. Taking advantage of every gust and eddy, she did succeed in making some altitude; but when she swung about again it proved not to have been enough, for

she approached the cliff at an even lower level than before.

The skraelings, who had often watched these flights with interest and not a little awe, now gathered below with much gesticulating. They seemed to realize that the girl was in trouble; that it would be impossible for her to regain the summit of the plateau.

Helga evidently appreciated this, too, and had the good sense to take the safest course left open to her, namely, to sail straight away from the plateau, and attempt to get as far from the enemy as possible before being forced to the ground.

In this a sudden shift in the wind aided her. It had been blowing from the plateau to the sea, but now it was blowing from the sea toward the plateau. In fact it was this shift, following the lull, that had disarranged her plans to gain the summit.

She rose into the freshening breeze until it began to drift her back. Eric and Angus, watching her, realized that if she would only continue to rise, with the nose of her plane against the wind, she would eventually be blown backward safely to the top of the plateau.

They shouted advice to her, only to have their words cast in their faces by the wind. They waved and signaled to her, but she was all intent on managing her glider, and did not look behind. They hoped that she would realize her opportunity herself, but she did not.

As soon as she began to drift backward, which maneuver would have carried her just where she most wanted to go, if she had only continued to rise, she instead lowered the nose of her plane and slanted down into the wind toward the sea.

Eric's glider was at the edge of the cliff where he had recently landed. Jumping into the seat again, he bade the others push him off, and soon was scaling after Helga. In his haste he did not think to arm himself; in fact, it was probable that, even if this had

occurred to him he would not have risked the delay of returning to the stone village for his rifle or automatic pistol.

Like Helga, he soared into the wind until he found himself drifting backward again, then leveled off and coasted down toward the sea. Beneath him the entire skraeling horde was racing across the fields after the girl. Although he had the older of the two gliders, his superior flying ability enabled him to make as good a glide, or even better, than the girl, so that he followed her at a slightly greater height.

At last she had come so low that she barely skimmed the trees of the forest. But she kept her head, and on passing over a small open space, she realized that she could not clear the woods on the other side, and so she spiraled down to a graceful landing. A few minutes later Eric was at her side.

"My darling!" he exclaimed, jumping from his glider. "Come on, we must run for it, for the skraelings are close behind."

A PATH led from the clearing toward the sea, and down this they hastened together.

But suddenly they stopped. In front of them, seated squarely in the middle of the path, was a huge gray-haired animal about the size of a polar bear or larger. He was sitting erect like a man; and his hind feet, which projected in front of him, were uncommonly human.

In the beast's lap was the shell of a large turtle, about a yard in diameter, with his left forearm and hand wrapped around it. The hand was most peculiar, three-fingered like the claw of a bird. With its other hand it was scooping up and eating, with evident primitive enjoyment, the insides of the turtle.

"*Arcla*," whispered Helga.

So this was the mythical *arcla*, of which the natives of Disco Bay had

talked. One more proof of the trustworthiness of the Eskimo traditions about the land beyond the frozen north from which their ancestors had migrated many centuries ago.

The towering gray *arcla* completely barred their path to the sea. Behind them they could hear the distant yet rapidly nearing cries of the skraelings. To plunge into the jungle on either side would mean to lose themselves in impenetrable thickets. What way could they turn?

For answer to his unspoken query, Helga took his hand and led him straight toward the menacing beast.

"Come," said she.

"But the *arcla*!" he objected.

He did not like to appear timid in the presence of his lady, but discretion was the better part of valor.

She smiled and said: "You have never seen *arclas* before? They are harmless beasts, and stupid as well. Come."

And she led him forward. So close did they pass the big gray creature that they had to brush against him, but he only grunted softly, and stared down on them with large dull brown eyes, and continued his nasty repast.

"I hope the skraelings have never seen one before," said Eric, as they hurried on.

At last they reached the top of the cliffs overlooking the sea, which broke against the rocks below. No beach here. The path turned to the northward and skirted the edge, so northward they turned and followed it.

A half hour more brought them to a small clearing. Below lay a crescent-shaped beach, with three whitening human skeletons. It was the spot where first they had met. Each looked at the other, and each read in the other's eyes the same tender thought.

But there was no time for sentiment, for the skraelings were approaching; were, in fact, coming down the path which led directly to this place, instead of down the path

through which they had come. If they had stayed where their gliders had deposited them, they would have been safer than now, for their very progress had merely brought them across the line of march of their enemies.

But there was no time for regrets.

"Can you swim?" asked Eric.

"Yes," she replied.

"Then come," said he. "If these skraelings are like their descendants of the outer world, we shall be safe from them in the water."

So saying, he led her down the face of the cliff. Together they plunged into the water, and struck out for an island which they could see about half a mile away. To-day there were no ice cakes floating, and so the sea was not so cold as on the day when he had first swum to the shore which he was now quitting.

But after their long run under the glare of the sun, hanging ever motionless in the exact center of the heavens, the subpolar waters were quite cold enough, although fortunately the wind had died down again, leaving them only a rolling swell to contend with. Even so, the cold of the water smote through to their very marrow.

THEY had scarcely begun to swim when the horde of skraeling pursuers debouched from the path at the top of the cliff. Wild were the shouts of rage as the savages found themselves cheated of their prey. And by such a narrow margin.

One of them shook his fist at the departing two, and shouted across the waves: "May the beasts of the deep get ye. We Innuits return to storm the plateau and dispose of your friends."

Then the skraeling hosts melted back into the forest again, and there was naught behind them but the rocks, and the silent shore, and the waving trees, and one skraeling sentinel. Helga translated the departing message.

The two swam on, and on, and on.

On through the icy water. But gradually their strokes slowed down, until finally the girl gasped and floundered.

"I cannot continue," said she. "I die—at sea—as a Viking should. Good-by—Eric—dear."

He seized her, but she shook him off, smiling a sad wet smile.

A faint, eerie strain of music floated in over the waves, like the singing of the wind in the rigging at night, a fit dirge for a watery grave.

"Listen!" exclaimed Eric.

Anything to divert her thoughts. Curiosity gave her new strength for a brief moment, and she swam as she listened. Forcing down his hands, and kicking vertically with his feet, Eric rose as far out of the water as he could, and gazed in the direction of the sound.

"Look!" he shouted. "Step in my hands and look!"

He clasped his fingers in front of him, palms up, thus forming a stirrup. She placed one foot in it, and he boosted, going deep under water himself with the effort. When he emerged again her face had lost its look of calm despair, and instead was wreathed in smiles.

"My people!" cried she. "They come! They come! We are saved!"

"Put your hands on my shoulders and trail out behind," he admonished. "I will swim with you."

The musical sounds drew nearer. Soon they could hear that it was a song, a lilting martial air, rhythmic to the time of oars. Soon they could see a boat approaching, with high curved prow, surmounted with a dragon's head, and ten rowers to each side, with a shield hung on the gunwale by each rower.

Behind it came another, and another, and yet another; but they were headed so as to pass well out beyond the two in the water. Helga was beginning to shiver, but she was somewhat rested and had recovered her courage.

"We must swim hard or we shall miss them," urged Eric. "Come!"

Once more the two swam side by side. The leading ship rowed on and passed ahead of them. They shouted and waved their arms, but the ship passed by, unheeding. Then they swam all the harder.

A little nearer passed the second ship, but this, too, failed to notice them. By the time the third came by they had almost reached the line of travel of the fleet, but it also gave them no heed.

Then came the fourth, their last chance. It was so near that they could see the faces of the crew. It seemed hardly possible that this ship could escape them. But the rowers bent to their oars, the warriors slept on their benches, and the helmsman in the stern and the pilot in the bow gazed steadfastly ahead. No one looked toward the two frantic swimmers.

They shouted, but the song of the oarsmen drowned their voices. This last boat passed on in the wake of the others. So near, and yet so far.

Eric and Helga looked into each other's eyes and gave up hope.

The last Viking ship had passed them by. Their last chance was gone. They were alone—cold, water-logged and exhausted, in the midst of the buffeting waves.

CHAPTER XVII.

BATTLE.

JUST as the last Norse ship passed out of reach of the two forlorn swimmers, the song of the rowers came to a momentary stop. Probably it was the end of a verse. Eric grasped the opportunity and barked like a dog, the most carrying sound that he knew. One of the oarsmen near the stern looked up from his work. Helga shrieked, and they both waved wildly. The rower spoke to the helmsman and pointed aft. The helmsman looked

around. Eric and Helga shouted and waved again.

But the helmsman returned to his steering and the boat kept on. Once more the two in the water felt despair.

Soon, however, it became evident that the ship was swinging in a wide circle. It was coming back for them after all! Forgotten was their cold and fatigue. They laughed for joy.

In a few moments the ship had reached them, and they were being hauled on board. Helga was recognized by the pilot. Quickly they shed their dripping hide garments, and were covered with warm, dry skins. But they were thoroughly chilled. So the ship swung toward the shore. The third ship had noticed the maneuvers, word had been passed to the two leaders, and now all three converged toward them. They beached in the very cove where Eric Redmond had landed from his diminished iceberg many months ago, and from which this swim had started. The lone skraeling sentinel had evidently long since given up his vigil, and departed.

As the keel grounded on the shore the Norsemen leaped into the water and pushed the boat securely onto the beach. Then driftwood was gathered, and a fire lighted from smoldering peat in a pot on board. Soon Eric and Helga were losing the pinched blue look from their cheeks, and were thawing out their water-logged limbs.

One by one the other ships were beached. As the last one, which had been the first in the line, grounded in its turn, there leaped out over the prow one of the handsomest specimens of young manhood that Eric Redmond had ever seen.

His feet and lower legs were incased in soft leather stockings, each bound by a pair of laces which spiraled up the legs, repeatedly crossing before and behind. On his soles were sandals, held by these straps. His knees were bare. From his shoulders to halfway down his legs, hung a coat of

chain mail. From his belt depended a pouch, a dagger and a large knotted club. On his arms were bands of gold.

Although his face was young, and his blue eyes had a youthful twinkle, he was bearded like Eric himself. His long, wavy yellow hair was surmounted by a bowl-shaped bronze helmet, from the sides of which projected two golden wings.

His hands were massive, his shoulders wide, and every muscle which showed was that of a trained athlete.

Helga gave one steady look at him, and then ran to his arms with a glad little cry, to be gathered up, leather blankets and all, and be covered with kisses.

"Mikjel! Mikjel!" she sobbed. "My own dear Mikjel!"

Eric viewed the scene aghast, then slumped to the sand, and covered his face with a fold of the skins in which he was wrapped. He was cold, tired, embarrassed, lonely, bereaved, and homesick. Nothing mattered now any more.

Helga chattered excitedly with her loved one, but Eric paid no heed to her words. He permitted his gloom to swallow and drown him.

"Eric! Eric!" she called, but he remained oblivious.

The girl ran back and knelt beside him. She put one arm around his shoulder.

"Eric! You poor tired dear," she crooned. "Look up. I want you to meet Mikjel, my brother."

Her brother! It was as though a bomb had burst close beside him, staggering him, and yet dispelling all his gloom in an instant. Dazedly he looked up at Helga, and at the blond giant smiling down upon him.

STAGGERING to his feet, he held out his hand, to have it crushed in a massive paw.

Said Mikjel: "Helga has told me what she owes you. We Norsemen do not forget."

The American drew himself up proudly. Bearded and stalwart Yankee faced bearded and stalwart Viking. Blue eye gazed unflinching into blue eye.

Eric answered: "Helga owes me nothing. I owe her the courtesy which is due every woman, and the respect and protection which a man owes to the woman whom he loves."

For a moment Mikjel's brow darkened, then he smiled again and said: "I am jealous at the thought of losing again the sister who has so long been lost to me. But you are a brave man. I hail you as my brother to be."

Food was now brought from the ships; and there also came ashore several Norse women, including Mikjel's wife, Freya. She and Helga embraced. Then Freya set about preparing the meal, while Eric and Helga huddled by the fire in their blankets, and narrated their many adventures.

But Helga carefully made no mention of Angus's infatuation for the skraeling maid; and Eric, wisely taking his cue from her reticence, also avoided this subject.

"We must rescue the friend of my Eric," said she to her brother, "for he has been very brave and loyal to us both. And also my slave girl, of whom I am most fond. Even now the skraelings may be storming the plateau, as they threatened to do when we eluded them at this very shore."

At the thought of a good fight, the Norseman's blue eyes flashed and took on a steely glint, and his great muscles tensed.

"Let us go at once!" said he.

But Eric interposed an objection, saying: "Wait for one sleep, that I may be refreshed, so that I can fight by your side, O my brother. The plateau can withstand attack for many days. The only danger is that Angus may seek to follow and find us; and I do not believe he will do that until after he has waited a reasonable time for us to return."

9 A

Helga joined him. "And I would go with you, too, my Eric."

The two men smiled down on her, and Mikjel murmured approvingly: "A Viking's mate!"

So awnings were spread on the ships to form tents. Hunters scattered into the woods, and returned with an assortment of small game. Soon more fires were burning, and pots were boiling; for, although all had just finished eating, it had been only a light lunch, and rowing is a hungry sport.

Now thoroughly thawed out, Eric donned a shirt of soft white cloth, a kirtle of brilliant blue, belted about the waist, socks of leather, like chamois skin, and sandals of thick hide, all lent to him by the jovial Vikings. They likewise shed their armor and donned kirtles of red or blue or purple.

For Helga, her sister-in-law, brought a low-cut tunic of fine woven stuff, with neck scarf of gaudy hue; and did her hair up on her head in Grecian style, telling her, the while, the latest news of her family and friends in the Norse stronghold, far to the south.

Eric, frankly, did not like the change thus wrought in his Helga. The primitive barefoot maid, with her leopard skin flung across one shoulder, was become a grand lady, a princess of the Norsemen. She was no longer his partner of the woods, dependent on him, but rather was now among her own people again. She had fitted back into the friendships and customs of her old life. He was an alien, in a strange land, among a strange race.

As he listened to Helga and Freya chatting together, he realized how far the former had adapted her Norse tongue to his Swedish, when all the while he had honestly believed that he was learning her language.

HELGA, with her womanly intuition, sensed his loneliness, and came and sat beside him. Putting her arm in his, she leaned against him, and whispered that she was his, till all

his troubles melted away at her touch. The others clustered round, eager to make friends with this chosen lover of the daughter of their chief.

And Mikjel bade Otho the Silver-tongued bring his harp and sing for their entertainment. So Otho brought his golden harp from the ships, and sang a saga of the olden days. Of the year 1121; for in that distant age the sun had moved through the sky, and there had been seasons, and by them men had numbered the years and had kept account of time. And this is the saga that he sang:

In those old days the Vikings lived on the narrow coast of a barren ice-capped land, which had been falsely named "Green Land" to induce them to leave their pleasant homes and settle there. But hardy sailors, venturing far asea, Biarni and Leif the Lucky and Thorfinn the Wanderer, and others, brought back tales of a fertile land called Vinland, where wheat, self-sown, grew in the valleys, and grapes upon the hillsides, and the snow seldom fell; till the hearts of those stout old Norsemen, worn out with the struggle for life on an inhospitable shore, cheered within them, and yearned for this pleasant land.

And they said: "Let us brave the perils of the sea once more, for at worst we can but go down to a Viking's grave, and at best we may find rest and peace, and plenty."

Thus sang Otho the Silver-tongued. He sang of how Eric Uppri, first Bishop of Christ for that desolate and misnamed shore, had set out with five barges and three hundred men and women, to colonize the new-found land.

He sang of the salt sea breeze and the green waves that ran foaming by and the creak of the straining oars and the setting sun nicked by the prow, as seen beneath the curve of the sail. How a black storm came up from the south, and drove them northward off their course. Northward, ever north-

ward, day after day, till they came to the land that no man knows, the land of the drunken sun, which runs round and round in the heavens like a mad dog red with rage.

Then the men dropped their oars for weariness, and the women wished to cast themselves into the sea. And everywhere was ice, peopled by strange animals who tried to come aboard and sail with them. But the good bishop cheered their souls and urged them on, till they passed through the ice and came to an open sea. And thus they found the country of eternal day.

So sang Otho the Silver-tongued. And as he sang, Eric and the Norsemen and women sat and listened, rapt. The waves tinkled against the pebbles of the beach. The wind soughed in the trees on the cliff. Back eight hundred years, Eric was wafted by the song, back forty generations to his ancestors, the bearded rovers of the sea. And here sat he, Eric Redmond, among the ancient Vikings, bearded and clad as they, with a Norse princess at his side, and their dragon ships beached near by.

The firelight flickered. All that was needed to complete the spell would be twilight and evening star. And, as if in answer to his unspoken wish, there came the twilight, too.

But there was no evening star, for the twilight was not the twilight of sunset—here the sun never sets, nor even budges from the center of the sky. The twilight was, rather, the darkening before a storm.

The silver song came to an end. The bearded giants applauded lustily. The spell was broken.

GLANCING at the sky, Mikjel gave hurried orders to secure the barges; and all the men, placing their shoulders to each in turn, shoved them still further onto land. Rain-drops began to scud slanting across the sea. Then the storm broke. All hands rushed for their ship dwellings.

The wind howled and raved. The rain pelted on the awnings. But within the men curled on soft sleeping rugs and swapped tales of adventure, until the weather settled down to a steady rain; when, lulled by the darkness and the patter, they drifted off to sleep.

When they awoke the central sun was beating down as before, the emblem of eternal day.

At once all was action, for Mikjel's men were no lazy louts. A force was told off to guard the women and the ships. The rest of the warriors, led by Mikjel and Helga, set out for the interior.

With them marched Eric, clad in chain-mail and winged helmet, armed with sword and battle-ax, a Viking of the Vikings. With his blue eyes and long hair and yellow beard, he might well have been brought up with them from childhood.

As they marched, Mikjel drew Eric to his side for a conference.

"You love my sister, do you not?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," Eric admitted, wondering what line the conversation would take.

"She makes no concealment of loving you," continued her brother. "What are your plans about becoming betrothed?"

"We consider ourselves already pledged, I suppose," Eric replied, "although, come to think of it, I've never categorically asked her to marry me. Ought I?"

"I should say not!" asserted Mikjel. "No gentleman would ever think of asking a lady to marry him."

"Then how is it arranged?" Eric was somewhat bewildered.

"I forgot that you came from another land where quaint customs prevail," laughed the Viking. "The proper procedure is for a spokesman to go with you to her father. You had better return for that purpose, with my ship, when it puts back. But there is one matter which we must first de-

termine, namely, what brave acts can you number to distinguish you?"

It seemed to the young American that his discovery of the non-existence of the North Pole would be sufficient to make him a marked man in his own country; but he realized it would count for nothing with this wild folk, who never supposed there was a North Pole, anyway.

"Well," said he, tentatively, "I saved Helga's life three times; once when she was wounded in the chute; once from the gorilla; and the other time when we swam together after her glider crashed. I killed a polar bear, and I could have killed a mammoth if it had only occurred to me to do so. Will that do for a starter?"

Mikjel sadly shook his head.

"It will do for a starter," said he, "but it is not enough to win the daughter of a bishop. Do you remember the leopard skin which she used to wear? It was given her by Altoonah, whom she spurned. You cannot do less."

UP the winding jungle path they marched. Once they came upon a large pack of doglike animals the height of small Shetland ponies. These beasts were high-shouldered, thick-necked, and deep-chested; for all their size they had a crafty slinking look. They melted into the undergrowth, at the approach of the party; one passed within reach of Eric's sword; but, just as he was about to jab at it, Mikjel stayed his hand.

"Wait!" admonished the Viking. "We are about to do battle, and we may need these *hoonder* for our funerals."

Eric was horror-struck! Was it a custom of this heroic race to throw their dead to the dogs? He shuddered, and much of the glamour of the north passed from him.

Then he shrugged his shoulders. After all, when he was dead, he would be dead, and what happened then would not matter. He looked about him at

his new-made, stalwart friends and at the blond princess, arrow-straight, who marched beside him; and the glamour returned.

They continued the march until they reached the open prairie, across which loomed the cliffs of the high plateau, surrounded by the skin tents and watch fires of the besiegers. Under the cover of the forest's edge the Norsemen held a council of war.

Then Eric and Helga went on alone together. The plain, at this point, was dotted with clumps of low bushes resembling sagebrush; and in one of these clumps Eric deposited his chain-mail and winged hat and weapons, lest he look unnatural to the eyes of the skraelings. He alone of all the army carried no shield, for he knew not how to manage one. Helga was already clad in her old leopard skin, with her hair done simply in two thick golden braids. Of all the Viking clothes, they retained only the leather socks and sandals.

As they neared the foot of the cliffs they were noticed by the enemy. Loud were the cries that rang from camp to camp, as the skraelings poured from their leather tents to see the unbelievable sight: the two, who had successfully eluded them only one sleep ago, now walking back unconcernedly into the very jaws of death.

The two halted as soon as they had been seen. They stood, uncertain whether to advance or flee.

One of the leaders of the savages sought to lure them on with soft and treacherous words; but when it became evident that they would advance no farther than the natives, at a word of command, charged forth in a thin skirmish line across the plain. Of course, Eric and Helga turned and fled.

Fleet-footed were they, fleetier by far than the stocky savages; but there was one of the enemy who outdistanced all of his compatriots, a tall, slim youth, with olive skin and nut-brown hair, quite unlike the copper-colored, black-

haired gnarled skraelings. For armament he carried a spear.

By this time the two had reached the bush where Eric's countermeasures lay hid, this comely youth was far in advance of the savage horde, and was almost upon them. They halted, and Eric hastily donned his armor, while Helga turned and faced the oncoming brave.

Eric, now fully armed, stepped to the girl's side. The pursuer halted a score or so of yards away.

The girl addressed him in his own language: "So it is you, Altoonah, prince of the tribe! You, who aspired to my hand, in spite of the unbroken law of my people. This is my mate, Eric Redmond. Dare you fight him alone and single-handed, with me as the prize?"

BUT Altoonah laughed in her face, and replied: "Why should I fight him alone, O Helga Uppri, when I have behind me a thousand braves to back up my will. I shall take you and him without even a struggle. You may wed me and be my queen; or be my slave without wedding me; which ever you choose. But your Eric shall die miserably for daring to aspire to the hand of the chosen bride of Altoonah."

Helga answered him calmly: "Altoonah, for the love that you bear me, unholy though it is, go in peace. You are in a trap. Go quickly, ere it springs and crushes you."

Again laughed the skraeling, and said: "I fear not you, nor your traps. And now I am minded that I shall take you without marriage, and curb your haughty pride."

Helga translated this to the man at her side. The chain-mail and winged helmet had wrought a strange transformation on him. It was a true Norseman who stood by the side of the Norse princess.

At the insult his brows clouded, and the purple veins stood out knotted in his neck as he leaped forward at the

insulter, brandishing his war club of gnarled wood with bosses of bronze.

Unterrified, Altoonah stood his ground, and cast his javelin full at the oncoming man. Full on the breast it smote Eric, and stopped him in his tracks. Through some of the links it passed, and pricked his breast, so that the red blood gushed forth; but the rest of the links held, and stayed it, and it did not reach his heart.

Eric plucked it out, and casting it from him, leaped upon Altoonah, seeking to brain him with the bronze-knobbed mace. Quick as was Eric, the skraeling was quicker. He ducked the blow; then, seizing the handle, he sought to wrest it from his opponent's hands.

This was not the sort of fighting to which the American was used. Ancestral blood and the glamour of Norse surroundings might carry him momentarily back in time for eight centuries, but the conditioning of thirty years is strong. Eric ceased to struggle for the club, dropped it, and planted his right fist square on Altoonah's jaw.

The eyes of the savage prince went fishlike, and he fell to the ground like a log. Seizing the mace again, Eric bestrode his prostrate form, uncertain just what the ethics of the situation demanded should be his next move.

A lusty, deep-throated cheer arose, as from the cover of the surrounding sagebrush, rose sevenscore stalwart blond warriors in winged hats and coats of mail.

Then the oncoming wave of naked savages surged over the prostrate form, and Eric was borne backward, swinging his club against the pricking spears.

The wave of brown bodies and flint-tipped bamboo spears was met by a wave of Nordic might. Spear was caught on shield, or on coat of mail. Clubs crashed on skull and on bamboo haft. Swords flashed from beneath painted shields of bronze.

The naked natives outnumbered the Vikings eight to one. The might and

poise of the lion contended with swarms of yapping curs. Brain and muscle and superior armament fought against the weight of numbers.

Mere numbers were not enough. Shouting, swinging, thrusting—glorying in the lust of battle—the blond-bearded giants forced the untrained savage hordes slowly back across the plain, amid clouds of red pollen. The skraelings manfully contested every foot of the way, and many a Viking felt the prick of their javelins on his unguarded legs and neck and right arm. But, leaderless, the savages were hopelessly outclassed. They needed even more numbers in order to overwhelm their opponents.

MORE numbers they were soon to have. When they had been driven back almost to the foot of the cliffs, the quickly summoned guards from the flanks and rear of the plateau joined them under the leadership of another nut-brown giant, resembling Altoonah, only older. This leader was clad in mail and helmet like the Vikings, and like them he carried a knotted club; but his hat bore horns instead of wings, and his hair and beard were a rich dark brown.

Mikjel hailed him with a shout: "At last we meet, Goovah, chief of Skraeldom. There is an insult to my clan to be wiped out in your blood."

And Goovah replied, as he strode forward among his men: "Mikjel, we battle to the death."

Then sturdy oak met stalwart northern pine.

Mikjel passed his sword and shield to Eric, who stood on his left hand; then, grasping his war club in both his massive fists, he sprang at the skraeling chief.

Goovah, on the haft of his own upraised club, received without flinching a blow that would have felled an ox; then swung at the Norseman in return.

Around the savage chieftain's feet

clustered his short and stocky followers, pricking and jabbing with their sharp spears; while Eric on one flank and Otho on the other guarded their chief, so that he might be free to devote himself to the onslaughts of a single mighty opponent.

Goovah's blow grazed the side of Mikjel's head and fell square on the mail-clad shoulder of the Norseman. Fell with such a force that the links of mail were flattened against the bone. But Mikjel only smiled and swung at him again.

Then Eric received a jab in one leg, and had to devote himself for the moment to his own defense. When next he looked around at his leader, the massive Viking was down.

Flat on his back, sprawled out on the ground, lay Mikjel, his sightless eyes staring straight up at the unblinking meridian sun, his winged hat rolled

to one side, his blond head unguarded. Goovah, swinging a heavy club aloft, stood astride his prostrate form.

A look of hate and triumph was in the eye of the skraeling chief, as Eric and Otho sprang forward as one man to ward off the fatal final blow. But a wave of cheering savages washed them back like pieces of driftwood. Mikjel the mighty was down. The joy of victory bore the skraelings on, as once more Goovah swung his club to deliver the interrupted blow.

No Norseman was within half a rod of the prostrate chief. There was no one to fend off the blow which would certainly crush his skull.

Eric cried aloud in agony as he made one last frantic effort to break through the skraeling line.

But it was no use. The line held firm. Mikjel lay unguarded from the blow of death.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.



Corposants

THE weird balls of fire which sometimes play about a ship's rigging are variously called St. Elmo's Fire, Jack o' Lanterns, and corposants—the sailors' name for them. A prolonged and violent storm preceded by intense cold is the atmospherical condition that produces them, and the latitude of the Azores is where they most frequently appear.

A corposant, which is about the size of a football, is never still; every time a gust strikes the ship the corposants vanish, to return as soon as it passes. When they illuminate the ropes and reefed sails with a pale, greenish light, it is a very ghostly sight. No man will go aloft when corposants are on the ship, because of a superstition that if the light of a corposant shines in a sailor's face he is doomed. They are also believed to foretell disaster, though they are never seen until a storm is decreasing. Jack Klondike, a Russian sailor on the Exeter City of the Bristol Line, was so terrified that he committed suicide by leaping into the sea when scores of corposants appeared in the rigging at the height of a five-day snowstorm in mid-ocean.

There is a theory generally accepted by sea captains that the electricity in the air in a heavy gale is caught on the extremities of the ship and forms into balls which move about until some stronger attraction in the wind draws them up into the clouds again. They are by no means common; men have sailed the seas for forty years without ever seeing a corposant.

Minna Irving.



"Keep away!" the patrolman barked at Casey

Mr. Jermin's Apoplexy

Casey was only a doorman at the bank, but he was young and Irish and red-headed—so it only needed an emergency like this ambulance case to prove his mettle

By R. C. PITZER

SPECIAL OFFICER HORTON, stout and uncomfortable, fanned himself with his pith helmet. He drew a deep breath and ventured to loosen the upper buttons of his gray tunic. In winter weather his post near the wide portals of the Jermin National Bank of Cumberland bothered him little, but in mid-July, with the early afternoon sun blazing down on the hot asphalt of First Street, and the heat waves radiating from the white marble bank and from the furnacelike plate glass of the near-by department stores, Horton suffered something little less than torment.

"Gor!" he said to the doorman. "Ain't it worse 'n what they tells about in church? An' the people come swarmin' along like it was October."

Casey, the doorman, young, slender and red-headed, shrugged. "Cool enough inside," he said. "It's always cool when old Jermin's in town. He's no warmer than a cold storage plant. But any time you want to quit, I'm honing for your job. Always did want to be a cop—hello!" he added, craning his neck.

"What's Perkins breaking in on the traffic signals for?"

The bank stood in the center of the block, but from their post the two men could see the khaki-clad traffic officer at the corner of First and York Streets signaling against the red lights. Whistles and the hurried clang of a gong brought all traffic to a pause, and at once a white ambulance skidded into view.

"Must have been a smash-up near by," Horton commented. "It's comin' this way."

"Sure," said the alert Casey. "From the York Street Emergency. I know that bus, right enough," he added as he meditatively rubbed the back of his head. "It's the one that took me out riding after Billy the Kid knocked me through the ropes. Murder, but that boy packed a wallop; and pretending to be an amateur like me! Why, thunder! It's stopping here."

The two men looked at each other in surprise, then instinctively glanced back through the open doorway into the vestibule of the bank. Beyond, great doors of plate glass revealed the quiet interior. A few tellers were at windows, and no more than two or three customers on the floor. It was the dull hour. Nothing there seemed to be amiss. The men ran down the short flight of steps to the sidewalk.

A young interne stepped briskly from the rear of the ambulance. A nurse followed. Two white-jacketed orderlies climbed out hastily and began to unload a stretcher.

"What's the matter?" Casey asked. "Nobody's hurt around here."

"Stand aside," the interne said roughly to the doorman. Then, lowering his voice: "Keep it as quiet as you can," he told the special officer. "We've just had a call at the Emergency from your Mr. Lipping. Mr. Jermin's had a stroke."

Horton gaped, white-mouthed, but found no words.

"We're cautioned against spreading the news until the doors close," the interne went on. "It might start a run on the bank—Here, you fellow, didn't I tell you to stand back?"

He glared at Casey. The doorman instinctively weaved aside, for the excited physician seemed about to follow words with a blow.

"Gee," Casey defended himself, "can't a man be interested in what's happening at his own bank? Needn't

look at me like we were plug-uglies billed for a knock-out."

The interne shrugged. "That," he snapped, "is the least that could happen to you, young fellow."

HE nodded to his crew, and orderlies and nurse passed hastily through the small crowd already gathered on the pavement. At the top of the steps the interne added a final word.

"Keep them out," he ordered Horton. "You two get down there and keep them moving. It's up to you to clear the walk. And mind, nobody's to know. Keep 'em off the steps so they can't see who we're bringing out. There may be something worse than apoplexy in this. Tell everybody that one of the clerks is ill. Say he has symptoms of cholera—that'll keep them out."

He gestured for the nurse and stretcher to precede him.

"There's all the devils to pay," the fat officer gasped in response to Casey's inquiring look. "I'll tell you in a minute. Help me clear the walk first—Here, you, get back there. Push 'em down, Casey, push 'em down—no, you can't go in. I don't care who in blazes you are. We got a case o' cholera in there, maybe—yes, Mr. Wooditch, it's one of the clerks. No, sir, you can't go in. Doc said to keep everybody out."

Traffic officers and a patrolmen came running to help clear the pavement. Horton beckoned the police to where he stood near the ambulance. Casey joined them.

"Just what's happened?" the doorman asked. "It came up like a thunder shower."

Horton gestured the other officers nearer and lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. The chauffeur of the ambulance leaned forward eagerly. He was a heavily built, square-jawed fellow, with a little cap perched precariously on the back of his head. Casey turned to Horton.

"What's happened?" he asked again.

"Internes don't get as excited as that when there's just a case to be taken care of. The fellow that patched me up over at the Athletic—it wasn't this guy—was some hard-boiled and cold-blooded bird. You'd have thought I'd copped his watch, the way he handled me."

"The bank telephoned the Emergency that the old man got took bad," Horton whispered. "They don't want the news to get out before closin' time, because it's likely to start a run on us. Doc says it may be apoplexy an' it may be somethin' more serious. Sounded like he might want to call in the police after he'd had an examination. You fellows 'u'd best hang around."

The officers turned as one man to look at the Jermin Building. The doors gaped; the open windows were empty. The only excitement seemed to be on the street. From where they stood the officers could see up through the vestibule to the gilt ceiling of the interior, aglow with indirect light, but, as the entrance was some eight steps above the sidewalk, the bank itself was invisible except for the top grille of a teller's cage.

"Guess I'll go in," the patrolman said; and started toward the wide entrance. He was on the lower steps when the nurse—a young, slender, dark-skinned woman, whose white uniform set off her athletic figure and boyish head attractively—came out hurriedly and ran down toward him. They stood for some little time in earnest consultation, with every one's eyes focused on them. Casey, agog with what seemed innocent enough inquisitiveness and a pardonable excitement, drew near. The nurse turned toward him.

"You get back from here," she said in low tones, but with a dangerous hardness in her contralto voice. It was as pleasant a voice as its owner was a person, yet something about it was like a danger signal to Casey. He backed off.

"And keep away," the patrolman supplemented. "It's me that's getting this report."

"But I'm the doorman," Casey argued. "I've got business here. I've got to be at that door."

"Forget it," the nurse warned. Casey stared in puzzled fashion.

There was a murmur from the crowd, heralding the coming of the stretcher. The interne stepped out first, his sallow face a shade paler than it had been, and his lips unavoidably twitching. He was wiping his hands on a linen handkerchief, and as he replaced it in his pocket his arm visibly trembled.

"It's all right," he said to the nurse. "They're coming with him. Get him settled comfortably in the ambulance." He led the officers to one side. "Come here, men. It's up to you to keep things quiet. They're all wild in the bank," he told them in a low voice. "It has been a tremendous shock. I suppose he was the whole works. Anyhow, it's Mr. Jermin, right enough. He was in consultation with Mr. Lipping, the cashier, when suddenly he tumbled from his chair. The bank's in rather a critical state, I understand, and they've got an enormous sum of money on hand for the steel mills. Anyhow, Mr. Lipping felt that if word got out prematurely regarding Mr. Jermin's illness, it might work untold harm to the institution. He's a cool-headed one, that cashier. Instead of bellowing for help and getting everybody stirred up, he called a teller into the office and locked the door. They got Mr. Jermin on to a lounge and opened his clothing; found he wasn't dead, and phoned the Emergency. He's alive yet, but that's about all. It seems, off-hand, to be a case of apoplexy, all right, just as Mr. Lipping diagnosed it to us, and yet—" the physician hesitated.

The little group of officers pressed nearer. "Yes?" the patrolman crisply asked. "What's odd about it?"

As they talked the orderlies came

hurriedly with their corpselike burden completely covered with a white sheet. The crowd, having heard a rumor of contagious disease, pressed farther back as the nurse joined the orderlies and taking hold of the side of the stretcher nearest the police helped the men ease their burden down the steps and into the ambulance.

"THE only strange thing about it," the interne went on to the interested group, "is that Mr. Lipping says that immediately before Mr. Jermin fell from his chair—it was a swivel armchair at his private desk in his own office—he swallowed a pill of some sort. He had no more than put it in his mouth when he dropped over."

"I'll have to look into that," the patrolman interjected. "What sort of a guy is this Lipping, anyhow?" he asked the group at large.

"Don't ask me," the interne snapped. "Well, my crew's ready for me. So long!"

He went briskly to the ambulance, where the orderlies already had placed their burden safely out of sight. As he mounted the step the physician involuntarily glanced back at the silent building. His face was chalk white. With that his nerve seemed to break, for the rest of his entrance into the car was taken in a leap that shot him from view with the abruptness of one in uncontrollable fear. The nurse mounted last, with equal haste.

Casey, glimpsing that white face, was struck with amazement. He looked hastily behind him, vainly searching for the cause of the terror that seemed to have taken hold upon the interne. The outer doors of the bank gaped wide; the open windows were still empty and silent. The whole building seemed overcome by the July heat. The doorman turned back to the street in time to see the nurse vault rather than climb after the physician.

The gong of the ambulance rang

with a sudden loud uproar, and the chauffeur, who had kept his engine running, stepped on the gas, at the same time giving his wheel a nervous twist that spun the car around, almost in its tracks.

At that instant, Casey, who had been standing in a sort of daze while unreadable emotions chased themselves like shadows over his sunny Irish face, let out a wild and astonished yell, as if some one had hit him with a brick. But it was a thought that had struck him. His instinctive reaction to a sudden idea was that whoop of amazement. Casey's muscular reactions, too, were an inheritance from shillelah dodgers. He went off as instantaneously as a cartridge explodes. The yell was still on his lips when his hands caught at the steel rods at the rear of the ambulance and he scrambled aboard.

Within the bank, as if Casey's cry had been a signal, broke out an amazing volume of noise—yells, shouts, screams, like the uproar of battle. It was equaled only by a like uproar within the ambulance.

From the bank, a small, red-faced man, with eyeglasses dancing behind him at the end of a broad black ribbon, came plunging wildly. His little round mouth was wide open, his eyes like light bulbs, his hair standing on end. What he was screaming in his high falsetto was wholly unintelligible. The crowd recognized Mr. Jermin. The bank force swarmed after its president, an hysterical mob of shrieking men and women.

In the middle of First Street the white, sober ambulance was performing a strange and startling series of evolutions. Its driver was trying to steer with one hand, while apparently the rest of him was engaged in a desperate struggle that was going on within the car. A white-jacketed orderly shot from the rear of the gyrating machine; the second orderly followed; then the interne. When the

physician fell an automatic dropped from his hand and went off as it struck the pavement. The ill-guided car, swerving wildly, smashed against the concrete traffic post that stood in the center of Front and York cross-streets.

"Thieves! Thieves!" shrilled Mr. Jermin to the goggle-eyed officers. "They've got the steel pay roll!"

SPECIAL OFFICER CASEY removed his pith helmet—several times too large—and mopped his red head delicately. "Not that I mind the heat," he explained to doortender Horton, lounging for a moment in the empty vestibule. "But I'm not yet used to having the old man give me a cigar when he comes along. It makes me sweat. And besides, my clothes don't fit. You always were a fat guy. I'll be glad when Mr. Jermin's tailor gets my uniform ready for me."

Horton sighed. "I ain't kickin'," he said; "an' I guess I'm more comfortable, besides not havin' the responsibility. But I'm blamed if I see even now how you spotted them crooks. They looked straight goods to the rest of us. An' it sure was the Emergency's wagon."

"Yeh. I told you I'd taken a ride in it. But there was a new driver—and a new interne—a whole new gang, and too many of them. They didn't have anybody except an interne and a driver when they trundled me out of the Athletic. Then I see this new interne's a scrapper with a cauliflower ear, and about as nervous as if he was going up against Dempsey. When he jumped back into the bus he was scared stiff."

"And when this female impersonator of a nurse hops on, his wig slips and I see a glimpse of red hair. It hit me so hard, I yelled. It came like a flash that this gang had got the ambulance out on a fake call and tied up the real doc and his driver. It was a sure bet, too, that they'd have a car waiting around a corner, so if they got out of sight it 'u'd be fare-you-well to our jobs. That's why I hopped to it."

"Mom used to say it didn't do me any good to be boxing around, even if it was only amateur stuff. Mom's changed her mind since I dragged down five centuries and a real man's job. Gee, I always did want to be a cop!"

THE END.

Unusual Statues

THERE are two statues of Andrew Jackson, astride a rearing horse, designed by Clark Mills, one being opposite the White House in Washington and the other centered in the old Plaza des Armes in New Orleans. They are exact duplicates, cast at the same foundry, the one in the South being ordered after the first was erected. Each cost thirty thousand dollars.

These pieces of bronze are extraordinary, in that they are the only statues of a rearing horse and rider entirely unsupported by braces. The figures are cast solid in the rear and hollow in the front, thus being exactly balanced on the hind legs of the quadruped. No inscription was cut in the pedestal of the one in New Orleans until the date of the occupation of that city by the Union troops, when General Butler had a quotation of Jackson's chiseled there as a hint to the Confederates: "The Union must and shall be preserved."

George Parke.



Chester

MILD *enough for anybody*

In answering this advertisement it is desirable that you mention this magazine.



What a cigarette meant there

The actors play their part—
and history moves thrillingly across the silver screen. But on the movie lot, how tense the days of strain! And how gratefully welcomed those hard-won moments that mean rest, relaxation... and a cigarette!

What a cigarette means here

They play their part, too—
these buyers of Chesterfield tobacco.

Thousands of pounds auctioned each day; distinct types of leaf—twenty grades of "bright" tobacco alone; important distinctions of curing; differences in texture, color, size, in the natural sugar which means natural sweetness — and Chesterfield quality to be maintained.

Our buyers do their part. In New York or Manila, Paris or Alaska, our billions of Chesterfields taste the same. The same wholesome fragrance, the same natural mildness, the same satisfying "body," because our buyers know exactly what they want—and whatever it may cost, they get it!

Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co.



field

.... and yet **THEY SATISFY**

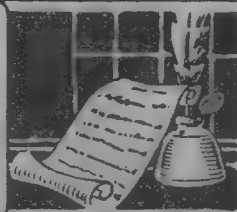
Typical scene in tobacco auction warehouse, where the farmer's work ends and the manufacturer's begins.

In answering this advertisement it is desirable that you mention this magazine.



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



"THE SPECTRAL PASSENGER" promises to hang up a popularity record that will hold its own with MacIsaac's best hits. Although the story closed more than a month ago, enthusiastic letters are still coming in hot and heavy. A few follow:

New York City, N. Y.

I don't usually betray enthusiasm over a good novel, but Fred MacIsaac certainly deserves high commendation for his recent story, "The Spectral Passenger." I can safely state that it is one of the best continuation stories that I have read in the ARGOSY in a long time.

Reading the ARGOSY is surely a pleasure to me and finds me expectantly waiting for the every Wednesday edition.

Contrary to various criticisms voiced by ARGOSY readers, I suggest that ARGOSY-ALL-STORY continue on with the wonderful work that it is accomplishing by publishing a varied assortment of stories, and am sure that many readers will agree with me. They should if they have been reading said magazine for the past five years as I have.

Rest assured that you are keeping this literature hound's appetite whetted.

CHARLES J. SCHRADIN.

Laurens, N. Y.

I have just finished the fifth installment of "The Spectral Passenger." It is certainly one of the best I have ever read. I can scarcely wait until next week to finish it. May we have many more by MacIsaac. Personally I like ghost, mystery and impossible stories. However, I realize that you cannot please everybody, so I will register no kick concerning stories which do not interest me.

Our family has read ARGOSY more or less for seven years. We like mysteries best, however, and watch your announcements carefully for signs of Footner, MacIsaac, and Slater LaMaster, the author of "The Phantom in the Rainbow." In closing I wish to say that I think you do well to please your many patrons as well as you do.

RALPH GARDNER.

Winona, Miss.

Have just finished reading ARGOSY for March 16 and am certainly glad that Fred MacIsaac's story, "The Spectral Passenger," is over with.

Being up on my toes, so to speak, for six long weeks is too much for my nerves. That's

what I have to say for all of his stories; they certainly are O. K.

I much enjoyed Kingsbury Scott in "Strange Waters," and Slater LaMaster's "The Phantom in the Rainbow." One of the long-time readers.

B. H. Moss.

THIS is reading under difficulties, all right:

Great Neck, N. Y.

I am inclosing ten more "Your Choice" coupons for another original drawing by one of your artists. The one you sent me before, illustrating "Dual Controls," is splendid, and I will have it framed.

I have read ARGOSY off and on for two or three years, but only started to subscribe to it last fall. Before that, I only bought a copy when it had a weird or impossible story in it by Ray Cummings or Garret Smith. Now we subscribe, but I have as bad a time as before. You see, I am only fourteen years old and go to prep school in Connecticut. We have three terms, each about three months long, with vacations in between of about two weeks at Christmas and Easter. While I am away at school, the ARGOSIES pile up and there are about twelve issues waiting for me at each vacation. Then I have to hurry through them and can't properly enjoy them.

You shouldn't print such interesting stories—they're ruining my health. I got interested—or fascinated—by "Horror on Owl's Hill" last night about ten o'clock. "The Phantom in the Rainbow" had kept me up an hour late already, and mother couldn't drive me to bed until I had finished it by eleven. Then I had a horrible nightmare of ghoulis apes playing baseball with my brain! Your fiendish magazine has me hoodooed—I can't stop, but am going to read "The Spectral Passenger" to-night.

"The Phantom in the Rainbow" is a masterpiece; it's the best story I have ever read—bar none! Slater LaMaster is a wonder. I'm sorry I missed his first story, "Luckett of the Moon."

"The Black Ace" is a fine story. I like a story that keeps you guessing. By the way, how about another *Gillian Hazeltine* crime story like "The Crime Circus"?

I was glad to see that *Semi Dual* is coming back, and that we'll have another "Radio Planet" story by Ralph Milne Farley. You may wonder how I know all about and welcome back the old-timers if I've only read ARGOSY for two years. When I was in Florida two years ago I found an old bookstore that had an attic completely filled with old copies

of different magazines. As I only wanted to read them, not keep them, the old woman in charge sold them to me for a nickel. If I wanted to keep them I could, but if I didn't, she would buy them back at two for a nickel when I was through with them. So I lost two and a half cents on each copy. But it was well worth it. In this way I read a great many wonderful stories, like "The Man Who Mastered Time," "The Fire People," "The Apes of Devil's Island," "The Radio Man," "The Radio Beasts," "The Radio Planet," "The Moon Pool," and some others. But a great many early issues she did not have, and I missed some stories like "The Blind Spot," "The Planeteer," "After a Million Years," "On the Brink of 2000," "Treasures of Tantalus," and "The Metal Monsters."

"The Sea Girl" looks as if it would be very interesting, but I must wait three months before I start it, because if I read the three installments that have already been published, I'll have to wait three months to get the other half, and I'd rather read it all at once. I have liked almost all of your recent "different" stories, but make them more frequent—the last really good one of that kind was "A Brand New World," published in September, and we had to wait five months for "The Sea Girl." Your "different" novelettes are good, too: more of 'em!

Argonotes are fine. Every one of us can kick and grouch and look dissatisfied, but ARGOSY suits us all, "right down to the ground," or we wouldn't keep on buying it. You can't please us all, but you please ninety-nine out of a hundred, and the hundredth one probably got up on the wrong side of the bed or doesn't know what he's talking about, anyway, so there you are!

Good luck to the best magazine on the market.

JOHN BERRYMAN.

MORE nominations for the "best" stories medals:

Auburn, Ill.

I have been reading your magazine for over a year, and so far I find it the best magazine I read.

The stories which you now print seem to me to be the best of all.

To my mind during the past year the following stories were the best I ever read anywhere: "World Brigands," "He Rules Who Can," "When Trails Were New," "The Apache Devil," "The Phantom in the Rainbow," and "A Brand New World." I could name dozens of others, but I think these were the best.

Of the novelettes the following were the best: "Sea Marauders," "The Albino Ogre," "Brothers in Red," "More Than a Double Cross," "The Powder Ponies," "Rain Magic," and lots of others.

Of authors: Fred MacIsaac, W. Wirt, F. V. W. Mason, Garret Smith, and George F. Worts.

If you want to keep one pleased reader keep ARGOSY as it is.

DAWSON BARNES.

Newark, N. J.

I have been reading ARGOSY-ALLSTORY for the past five years, and I am proud to say that I have not missed a single copy in all that time.

"He Rules Who Can" was, in my opinion, one of the best stories I've ever read in ARGOSY. W. Wirt is great! Let's have some more of him. I just finished "The Phantom in the Rainbow," and I thought it was a swell story.

I think the ARGOSY, as is, is perfect. The stories are all of high caliber and the Westerns are very good reading.

The best thing I can say for ARGOSY is that I've read every single story in every volume, and that's saying a lot.

Argonotes is a great thing for ARGOSY. Already I have won over twenty-two new readers for the magazine.

Leave ARGOSY just as it is; don't change it.

SAMUEL GERBER.

ANOTHER out of the usual way of meeting ARGOSY is this:

Los Angeles, Calif.

I have been reading, and have never missed an issue, since I found an ARGOSY on a park bench in Paris, January, 1920.

I am completely satisfied and have urged my friends to buy the magazine also, as they began to borrow it from me.

NORMAN D. WATT.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....

I did not like.....
because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....State.....



Looking Ahead!

The Foreign Legion in action! A tense story of one of the world's scrappiest military outfits is

The Word of Adjutant Kent

A Two-Part Story

by F. V. W. MASON

Sweating and stewing in the stifling heat of the African jungle, harassed by disease, surrounded on all sides by savage Arab hordes, this little Foreign Legion post puts up the sort of fight that has made the Legion famous. In this thrilling tale the author of "Captain Nemesis" takes us into another field and demonstrates that he is as much at home in a sunbaked Legion post as on the deck of an Eighteenth Century privateer. Action and drama from start to finish!

Don't miss the opening installment in the issue of JUNE 8th

A Companion Feature of this issue will be

THROW OUT THAT GAT!—by W. WIRT

A Complete Novelette

A story laid in El Paso—with the Secret Service pitted against dope-runners, smugglers, killers, racketeers and Oriental wiles. From start to finish there is not a dull moment—in other words, a typical Wirt story.

A BIT FARTHER AHEAD

FANTASTIC

Ray Cummings

in the issue of

JUNE 22nd

WESTERN

W. C. Tuttle

in the issue of

JULY 13th

MYSTERY

George F. Worts

in the issue of

JUNE 29th

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

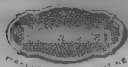
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Out Every Wednesday



This famous doctor's prescription relieves gastric distress heartburn acid stomach

AFTER a hearty meal—agony, distress? Thousands have learned that Pepto-Bismol brings quick, pleasant relief from indigestion, sour, acid stomach, heartburn and gastric fermentation. Pleasantly flavored, it soothes the delicate stomach lining. Whenever your stomach is upset, take a teaspoonful of Pepto-Bismol, repeat every half hour until completely relieved. At your druggist's—50¢. The Norwich Pharmacal Co., Norwich, N. Y.



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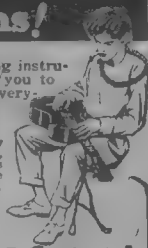
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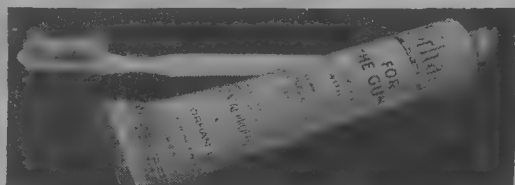
This dentifrice is more than an ordinary toothpaste.

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Get a tube from your druggist, today, 35c and 60c.

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Forhan's for the gums



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